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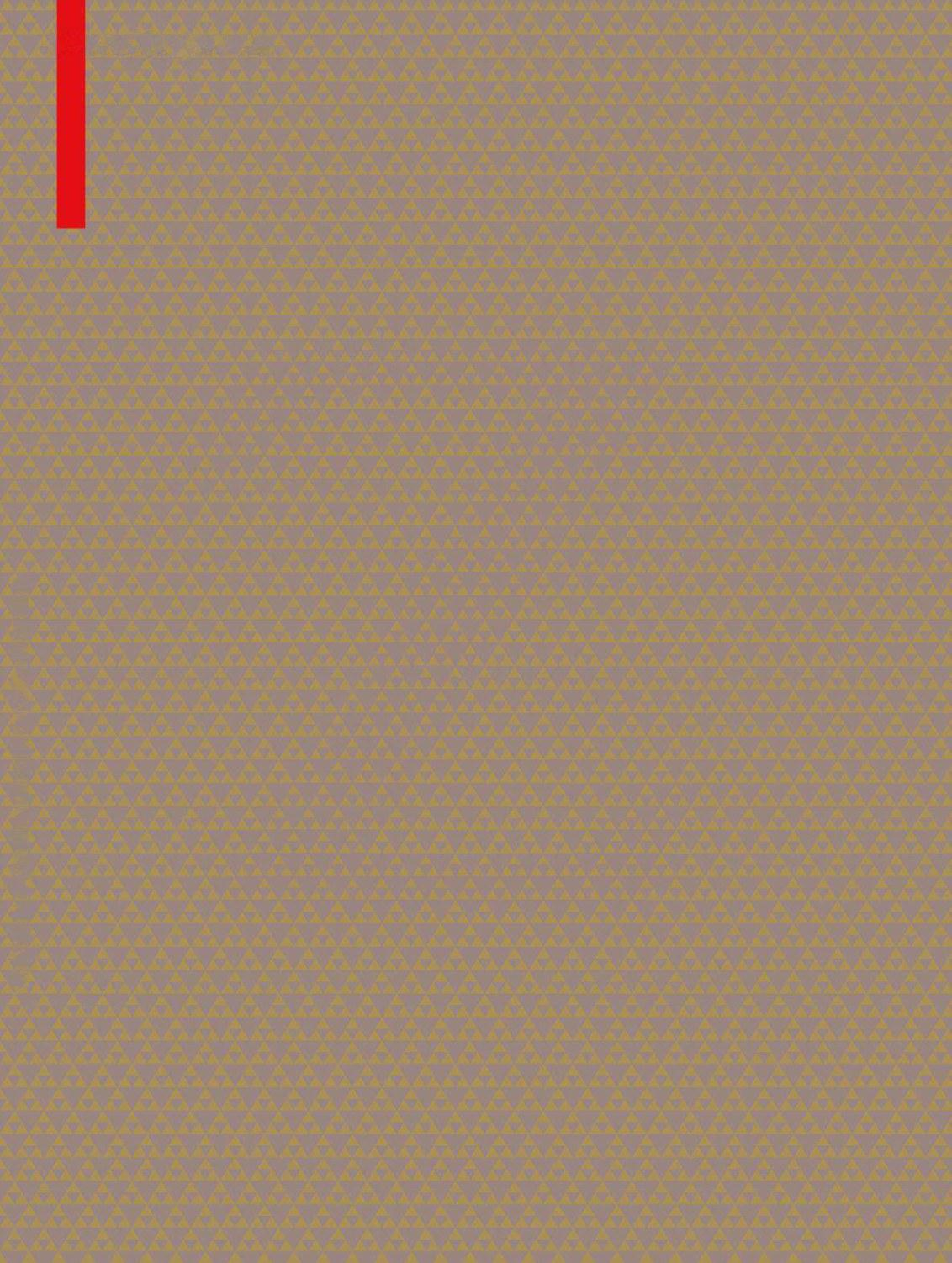
REVIEWED:
ZELDA: SKYWARD SWORD
THE WII GAME YOU'VE BEEN WAITING FOR

In making extensive use of Wii MotionPlus control and daring to play with the series' solid-gold template, *Skyward Sword* is the freshest *Zelda* game in years. Our review on p94 explores how Nintendo has produced its latest masterpiece

REVIEWS
- UNCHARTED 3
- SUPER MARIO 3D LAND
- DARK SOULS
- RAGE
- BATMAN: ARKHAM CITY
- RATCHET & CLANK: ALL 4 ONE

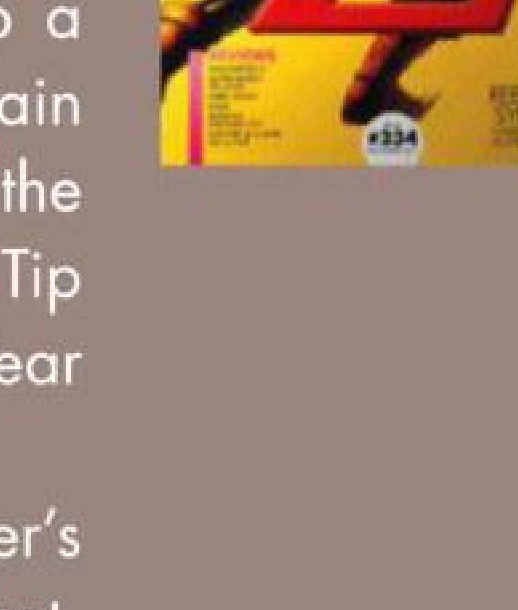
REBUILDING SYNDICATE
INSIDE THE FPS REVIVAL OF BULLFROG'S 16BIT CLASSIC





A link to the past that so many games want to forget

Sometimes playing modern videogames brings to mind 'King-Size Homer', an episode of The Simpsons from 1995 in which the star of the show courageously succeeds in reaching a body weight of 300lb so that he can gain official disability status, and thereby work from home. His computer terminal is installed in his house, but rather than attend to it dutifully he (naturally) sets up a perpetual-motion drinking bird to repeatedly tap a button on the keyboard. Up and down goes the little bird's head, again and again, in the same spot, over and over. Just like a finger stabbing the exact same screen position during sessions with so many iOS games. Tip tap, tip tap, tip tap. Repeat until dead. (Or until Springfield's nuclear power plant approaches the brink of catastrophic meltdown.)



Creating a game capable of engaging – and sustaining – a player's interest from such a primitive mechanic is clearly a particular kind of art, and we're not about to denigrate games as joyous as *Jetpack Joyride* when they've helped us through so many otherwise-tedious journeys. But stepping off the train and settling in front of a console to bathe in *The Legend Of Zelda: Skyward Sword* is a tingly experience of some contrast.

It's a given that Nintendo's game would touch parts of your brain that go unacknowledged by even the best iOS releases, but *Skyward Sword* also stands apart from most 'proper' games we're fed nowadays. When was the last time you stood in the middle of a game environment entirely unsure about what to do next, and rather than experiencing frustration felt only a sense of wonder? When was the last time you played a big-budget game that didn't feel like a showy procession, spectacle taking precedence above all else? And when was the last time you were gifted gameplay tools that transformed your perception of a piece of videogame hardware?



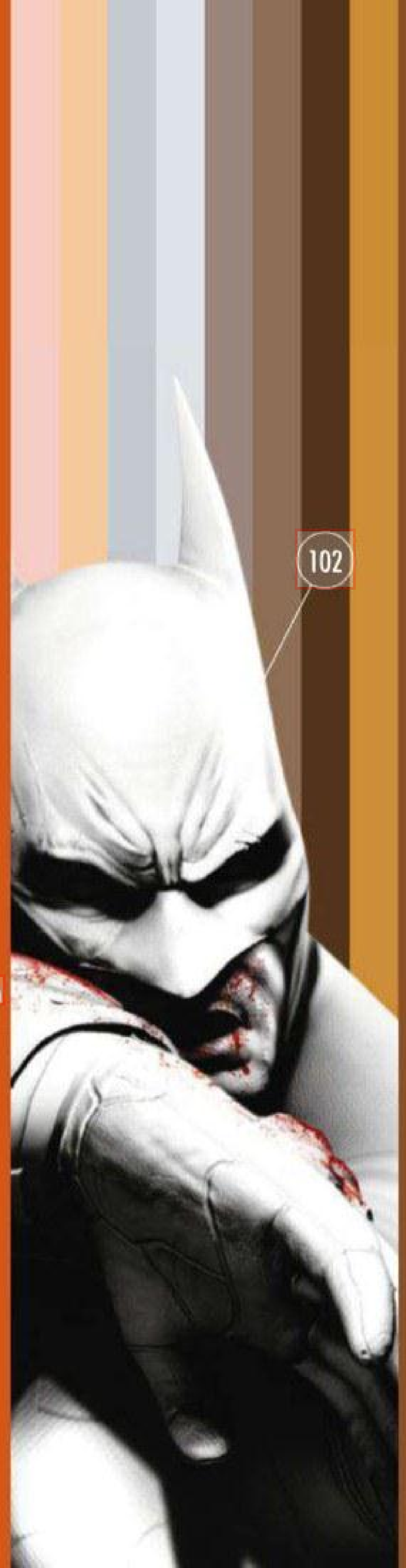
We'd almost forgotten that games could be like *Skyward Sword*. Naturally, it recalls the magic of *Zelda*s past, but that's only partly why it's such a triumph. Our review, beginning on p94, tells the bigger story.

games





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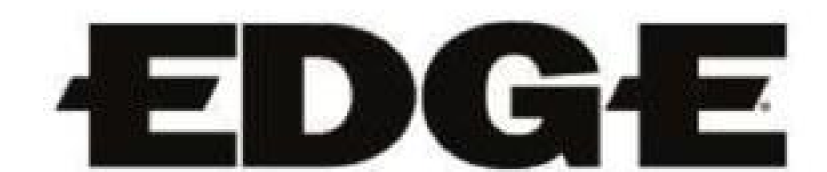


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GAMING WORLD INSIGHT, INTERROGATION AND INFORMATION



VLEDGE

Ready for an upgrade? As Apple launches a new iPhone (1) we investigate on p10 how the slim and slippery device will shape up as a gaming platform, with testimony from some of the world's leading iOS game makers, including *Infinity Blade* studio Chair Entertainment. On p14 we look to the realms of MMOGs (2) and discover the world of hacks and viruses that can see your hard-earned loot sold off for free. Getting content for free is the plan from Supermono Studios, whose *Forever Drive* (3) needs its players to provide its racetracks. We talk to the game's developers on p18 to find out more. Then, on p20, we look at how the Writers' Guild Of Great Britain is changing it guidelines in accordance with modern developments in game scripting (4). Returning to Apple, on p22 we salute the late Steve Jobs, the man who transformed the world of portable gaming without really trying. Among p24's Soundbytes, Cliff Bleszinski of Epic Games (5) reveals his underwater aspirations for the Locust, Shigeru Miyamoto bigs up the new *Zelda*, and *Halo: Reach* players the world over discover that they may have thrown a sticky at Megan Fox. Finally, in My Favourite Game, actor, writer and music video director Peter Serafinowicz (6) explains his admiration of Link, his early observations of Mario's wiggle, and the excitement involved in being to call upon a titanic 3.5K of RAM.



Smarter, better, faster, stronger

What does the arrival of iPhone 4S hardware mean for Apple's positioning in the mobile gaming market?

Delaying the annual iPhone update reveal from summer into autumn gave the online rumour mill extra time to churn out speculative posts and tweets about the device's supposed features, and it seized upon every bountiful opportunity. But by the time Apple took the stage in early October to show off the new handset – dubbed iPhone 4S – it hardly resembled the curved, wider-screened, 4G-capable concoction dreamed up by bloggers and the Photoshop savvy. In fact, the new 4S appears virtually identical to its iPhone 4 predecessor.

While many hoped for the wow factor of a revolutionary update akin to last year's revision, Apple's new phone is more an incremental upgrade than a truly new device; it's the iPhone 3GS to the prior 3G – one that delivers small but notable new features to the existing design. Chief among them is Siri, an exclusive digital assistant that retrieves info, schedules meetings, and sends SMS messages via voice commands. Siri's intelligent handling of agenda conflicts and ability to learn names and user tendencies over time, plus deep integration within iOS 5, make it a bold addition that may prove as influential on the next wave of handsets as previous models' touchscreens and Retina displays.

Key to Siri's performance on the hardware, Apple says, is the dual-core A5 chip – the same processor that powers the iPad 2 hardware – which allows up to double the CPU speed and reportedly seven times faster graphics processing than the iPhone 4 A4 processor. Paired with the crisp Retina display, the A5 component seems poised to deliver the most fluid and realistic videogame visuals on a smartphone or tablet to date. As **Phil Schiller**, senior vice president of worldwide product marketing at Apple, exclaimed at the press conference: "We see it scream on games."

However, the lone game showcased at the event was not *Angry Birds* or *Smurfs' Village*, nor any other casual App Store smash. It was *Infinity Blade II*, the striking sequel to Epic Games and Chair Entertainment's sword-duelling smash, which itself earned millions on iPhone and iPad and was frequently used as a showcase of the units' respective visual capabilities. **Donald Mustard**, founder and creative director at Chair, claims the "acceleration of the technology is astronomical", and that the A5 chip allows more nuanced details to be seen within the game experience.

> "The acceleration of the technology is astronomical. It's amazing, what we can push graphically now"

"With the A5, we can turn on dynamic character shadows, for example, where we can have these huge characters with headdresses, and there's dynamic shadows casting down across their bodies on to the ground," Mustard explains. "We can have dynamic light shafts filtering through the trees and the characters, and then you'll see your sword swiping through the air with light shafts dancing around it. It's amazing, some of the stuff that we can push graphically now."

Work began on *Infinity Blade II* back in May, right as the studio finished the free Arena multiplayer update to the original. However, Mustard says the 13-person team only had access to the iPhone 4S hardware for weeks before Apple's event, with all previous work guided by hopes and expectations. "Right at the start of *Infinity Blade II*, we said: 'Let's hope that happens, and let's plan for it right from the start.' I'm glad that we made the right decisions because it takes time to implement a lot of stuff," he notes. "We didn't have to cull any of our hopes



Apple's iPhone 4S will be available in more than 22 countries by the end of October



Apple CEO Tim Cook announces the arrival of iPhone 4S on stage in Cupertino, California





From top: Donald Mustard, founder and creative director, Chair, and Peter Farago, VP of marketing, Flurry

for what the device could do. It does everything that we'd hoped for."

Graphical strides may also push heavy hitters from the console and PC side towards further dalliances with the App Store feeding frenzy. **Peter Farago**, vice president of marketing at mobile analytics firm Flurry, says the pairing of the processor and Retina display "makes most of the portfolios of the Ubisofts, EAs and Activisions more suitable for that platform." And *Infinity Blade* is a perfect example of how core-centric games can succeed at reasonable prices, with Epic claiming more than $20 million (£12.9 million) in sales over its first ten months of release.

Naturally, additional iPhone 4S-ready titles are currently in the works. Namco Bandai's *Sky Gamblers: Rise Of Glory*, an aerial dogfighting title, is optimised for A5 devices, while Firemint's lauded *Real Racing 2* – released late last year – looks better than ever in 4S form via a planned update which greatly enhances the vehicle and track details. Plus, thanks to iPhone 4S adding support for AirPlay (Apple's audio and visual streaming technology), for wireless app mirroring to television displays via Apple TV, the game also picks up a splitscreen mode that lets up to four players use an iPhone 4S or iPad 2 as a controller.

AirPlay is just another intriguing option for developers, as is the new eight-megapixel camera, which takes brighter photos, more quickly, while also allowing 1080p video recording. But Siri may offer the most fascinating boost to the next round of iPhone games – something Mustard says he's eager to explore.

"I immediately started to think of all sorts of cool stuff you could do with Siri from a gaming standpoint," he explains. "Seeing how integrated it is with all of Apple's apps, I would be surprised if at some point an SDK isn't released to developers to integrate it into their apps as well. I think it could have a huge impact on gaming."

"I started to think of all sorts of cool stuff you could do with Siri from a gaming standpoint"

The iPhone 4S handset advances Apple's smartphone product line, but unlike in the past, this latest model doesn't kick the previous low-end edition to the kerb. Instead, Apple will continue to offer its iPhone 3GS and 4 for free with the right contract, but both will be limited to 8GB capacities. Meanwhile, its iPhone 4S will take over the previous iPhone 4 pricing scheme, introducing a new 64GB capacity for a premium price. Paired with a new lower entry price for iPod Touch ($199 or £169) – which remains similar to the iPhone 4 hardware in many respects – it's cheaper than ever to bring home an iOS-capable device.

The wider range of active handsets and lower entry points allow Apple to aim down-market and attract more price-sensitive consumers – all the while expanding the market share for its iOS operating system, which recently shipped its fifth major version and now runs on more than 250 million devices. With so many proven and inexpensive App Store options, an iPhone or iPod Touch may look better than ever to parents seeking to shed the pricier games of dedicated handhelds. "Nintendo's *Mario* IP is cute and appeals broadly," notes Farago, "but it's still kind of a limited and niche audience compared to a lot of the kinds of free and simpler games you'd find on iOS and Android."

Device fragmentation is frequently cited for the lack of many popular mobile games on Android, since so many different phones and tablets utilise the open-source operating system. While all three current iPhones boast similar forms, the varying innards create a challenge for developers.

Mustard claims *Infinity Blade* II will run similarly on iPhone 4S and iPad 2, but that owners of older devices will see some fidelity loss. "I'm not going to pretend that *Infinity Blade II* will have all the bells and whistles that will be available with the A5-powered devices, but it will still look awesome," he says. "We want to make sure the experience that they get on 3GS is pushing that device to its limits."





Sky Gamblers: Rise Of Glory (above) is Namco Bandai's latest iOS title, designed to take advantage of the extra 4S power. Firemint's *Real Racing 2* (top) will be getting an update to offer wireless multiplayer on 4S or iPad 2

Still, despite Android's myriad handsets and piracy issues, Mustard concedes that "there's a lot of good work being done by Google and by other people on those devices to make the marketplace more viable," and admits: "I'm sure we'll be there eventually." One of those other parties he refers to may well be Amazon, which recently announced its Kindle Fire, a seven-inch tablet running on a customised version of Android and set to debut in November for $199 (UK pricing was yet to be announced as we went to press). That's less than half the price of an entry-level iPad 2, and the Fire similarly undercuts its bigger-named Android-powered competitors such as the Samsung Galaxy.

Amazon's device is primed to deliver easy access to the online retailer's array of ebooks, music, movies and television, but it also serves as a gaming device, with titles like *Angry Birds* and *Plants Vs Zombies* announced thus far. It's unclear how large a role games will play in Kindle Fire's appeal, but Farago considers it a parity play – an attempt to match up on some level with the numerous other touchscreen devices that play videogames, even if it doesn't





TO INFINITY
Launching December 1, barely a year after the original, *Infinity Blade II* (left) builds upon the winning template with a decidedly larger and less-linear adventure, plus hundreds of new and customisable weapons and items to hoard. Fresh combat styles shake things up a bit as well, such as the option to dual-wield swords without a shield. It'll make you speedier and unlock intense combos, but parrying and dodging will become all the more essential.

Developer Chair is following a massively social route as well, thanks to the online co-op challenges in the new Clash Mob mode. One example centres on an orc titan with ten million hit points, and each player can take one crack at the boss in a 24-hour window. Whatever damage you deal before inevitable death adds to the accrued total, and if it's defeated in time, everyone who chipped in earns some ultra-rare loot. Competitive multiplayer, however, remains under wraps for now.

become a cornerstone of the Kindle Fire experience. Launching a tablet without even basic gaming capabilities could leave a manufacturer vulnerable as cheap mobile titles continue to flourish.

"Gaming is not where they're going to win," says Farago about the Kindle Fire's chances in the marketplace. "Apple is a hardware and software company that's been doing this for a long time, and they're coming down from the higher-end desktop and laptop computers. They understand the hardware game better, and the elegant and tight coupling between an OS and a beautiful UI."

Like the iPad 2 hardware before it, iPhone 4S offers a relatively minor revision of its predecessor's core features, but the competition remains unsteady; and unless a company can deliver that same masterful blend of sleek, dependable hardware and insightful, user-friendly software, Apple's position atop the perch of both the smartphone and tablet markets appears firm. And with these latest initiatives targeting both early adopters and budget-conscious consumers, even dashed expectations regarding the newest model may not prevent the company's dream scenario – of an iPhone in every person's pocket – from coming to fruition. ■

INNER SPACE
1 Siri is an automated voice control system. 2 The A5 chip is a dual-core ARM design with 512MB of RAM. 3 The camera now boasts eight megapixels. 4 And can record movies in 1080p. 5 The phone debuts the fifth major release of iOS. 6 And features the iCloud online storage system. 7 The 3.5in screen has a 960×640 resolution. 8 Facetime video-calling returns. 9 Newsstand offers books and mag subs (yes, including **Edge**). 10 The new casing incorporates a dual-antenna system









Grand theft MMOG

Hackers are making big business out of pickpocketing in-game inventory. We talk security with a top MMOG cop

LulzSec may have caught the media's eye as it turfed through Sony's underwear drawer, but it is an atypical hacking outfit. Hacking isn't just the purview of mischievous lone wolves or tech-literate politicised malcontents, it's big business. It's organised, corporate and run out of countries such as China and Russia, where there are few means of legal recourse. And hackers are going after gamers.

During our trip to Gamania (see Studio Profile on p136), a Taiwanese company that's now one of the largest publishers and developers of online games in Asia, we get the chance to speak to **Karl Hsu**, its chief information officer and a former hacking expert at the Taiwanese National Security Bureau. This is a rare opportunity – hacking scandals have spooked major western companies and our repeated attempts to discuss security with the bigger players in online gaming have been declined. Hsu, however, is extremely open with us about the battles Gamania faces, and his revelations are both truly chilling and not a little bizarre. They're also no less applicable to other publishers of MMOGs, whether they're ready to admit it or not. Read on to find out how game hacking became an industry, why thieves are more interested in your level 80 Vorpal Sword than your credit card, how custom-built viruses hide and hijack your inventory, and what you (and MMOG companies) can do about it.

Karl Hsu is the chief information officer of Gamania and an expert on hacking



High-profile attempts to loot online companies for players' bank details are the exception and not the rule, Hsu tells us. In fact, online game companies aren't the real target at all – Gamania itself has only once been the victim of a direct attack, back in 2003, before Hsu joined the company, and even then the hackers didn't make it to the server level.

"The largest problem is that many gamers claim that Gamania has been hacked because their items are stolen," Hsu explains. "So they say: 'It's your responsibility to fix this, and you're a lousy company'. But actually, no, they've got a virus on *their* computer. Some sort of backdoor that allows hackers to steal their [in-game] items."

"They've got a virus. Some sort of backdoor that allows hackers to steal their [in-game] items"

Hsu discovered the first of these viruses in 2004, custom-built to rip items from the inventories of players of Gamania's games. The virus was so bespoke, and so widespread, that it was subsequently named after the company. "We want to be famous, but not like this!" Hsu laughs. Since then, the virus has been adapted to attack other MMOG makers' customers, and many others have appeared, adopting increasingly elaborate strategies to avoid detection and steal items.

"*Maple Story* in Taiwan is one of the largest problem titles," Hsu says. "There's a script that logs in and checks your items. [Hackers] check your levels first, because if you're low level, you don't have anything to steal and they'll log off and check again in a few months. The virus itself sits there doing nothing, watching your levels grow. It doesn't report [to the hacker's server], because if it reports, users know."

Then, by checking the value of your items against freely available lists on the marketplace, the virus determines when to liberate you of your loot.

"It detects when you aren't moving your keyboard or mouse, and it commands your character to go somewhere and drop your items," Hsu says. "[Alternatively] a script sells your items for free and a dummy account comes up and buys it from you. We have some methods to detect if you are level one to three but have very powerful items, but it doesn't work very well [in tracking down the hackers' dummy accounts], because they pass the items between eight or nine characters run from different accounts. So they have a team working on this. You can't trace it – it's like the real world."

Viruses that turn your avatar into a self-bankrupting automaton are just the beginning, though. Others pack all your documents, spreadsheets, emails and chat logs into a single hidden .zip file. Since sending large files would arouse suspicion, the .zip gets chopped into tiny chunks and transmitted to the hackers only when the user hasn't touched the mouse or keyboard for several minutes, ceasing as soon as he or she returns. Hsu describes huge compartmentalised hacker workforces, usually based in China, who then analyse the information.



In-game loot may seem like an odd target, but the best *Lineage* items can sell for thousands of pounds. What's more, they're harder to protect than physical goods





Diablo III (above) hasn't been released, much less hacked, but its auction house means the company will have to contend with the thorny issue of virtual theft. *Eve Online* (left) already has, but its terms of service make no promises about recovery of goods or money. Scams, meanwhile, are considered all part of the game

SILENT RUNNING
Viruses that have been captured are unleashed into observable environs such as virtual machines, completely isolated operating systems, from which their activities can be monitored. But viruses are now of a level of sophistication that they can thwart even these efforts to detect them. Hsu recalls his first encounter with such a strain. "It did nothing – no connection, no check-in, nothing!" he says. "It was a very late night, sitting there, waiting for it to do something. Three minutes? No. One hour? No. Two hours? No. So we got an old machine and put the virus in there. Fifteen minutes and it started to report. It knew when it was in a virtual machine!"

"So: 'OK, this is from MSN Messenger, this is from a Web site, this is from a bank' – and they start to process these things, sending them to different groups," Hsu explains. "There are a group of people behind these servers working only with financial sites, then some people work with online game accounts. And if you have an MSN account, you have a Yahoo account, a Google account... You can imagine a lot of users will use the same password for each one and never change it. [The hackers] will start fishing around with your ID and password. They'll try your bank, online shopping companies, something like that."

In Taiwan, there's been a spate of instances in which hackers have so adeptly analysed the behaviour of their victims that they've been able to pose as the owner of a compromised IM account, convincing close friends that some emergency requires them to purchase prepaid cash cards and read off the serial number.

Comparatively, it sounds a trivial crime to steal in-game loot, but for hackers this is just as real a source of ill-gotten income. Free-to-play games have long been the favoured model in Asia, and the idea of buying and selling in-game items for real-world cash is entirely accepted.

"In Taiwan it's a business already," Hsu explains. "It's not something under the table. There are sites where you can go and bid on items – one good item from *Lineage* can sell for 100,000 new Taiwanese dollars [£2,146]. It's a lot of money. It's crazy."

"It's just a record in your computer that you own. So the hackers are actually stealing nothing!"

But despite the flagrant profiteering of hackers, ownership of in-game items is such a legal grey area that it's hard for victims to establish a crime has occurred.

"You see, here's the trick," Hsu says. "If you steal credit cards, it becomes international crime. They're owned by big companies such as Visa and MasterCard, who have powers in every country, even in China. But the gaming industry doesn't. The second thing is that most game companies claim the items belong to the company, not the user. You have the right to use it, but you don't own it. It's just a record in your computer that you own. So the hackers are actually stealing nothing! And then there's the political situation with China – we don't have cooperation between the police departments. [If] we track the IPs and then we find out they originate in China [then] sorry that's not even going to work. They don't even want to care about this. Legally, it's not a crime. Some countries do have a very strict law that prevents people from stealing anything from a computer. But the point of that is from the perspective of personal identity or privacy – it's not for valuables. So for the gaming industry, even now we cannot solve this threat."

South Korea has had some success in mitigating the issue of hacking by enforcing that all Internet users supply their real name, but in countries where there's no legal obligation to do so, it's proven hard to convince gamers that it's in their interest. Gamania has been able implement other schemes, as Hsu explains: "We developed cards for our gamers – they're the same spec as your ATM card. We have 130,000 players using this card in Taiwan. But some people don't like to carry this all the time so we developed some OTP [one-time password] tokens. But we can only try from this direction, not the other way; we can't convince them that to play Gamania's games you mustn't go to strange sites. My strategy for the gamers is education, education, education. When they know they're in danger, they will be careful. And for us, the strategy is quick response. We're the guys who are always falling behind. There's a new virus, and *then* you have new medicine. You don't have the medicine for a disease that doesn't exist. So how quickly we respond, how quickly we detect problems – that's what we look at."

The idea that items can be exchanged for real-world currency is already established in the east, but with the massive proliferation of free-to-play games it's soon to become a more significant market in the west – and those wishing to exploit it will multiply in tandem. The silence of western MMOG companies over issues of security is ominous. It's understandable that they don't want to scare away customers, but Hsu emphasises that the only way to tackle this issue and avert scandal is to let players know that their loot is under threat, and how to protect it. ■

The endless highway

SuperMono's new iOS racer Forever Drive takes user-generated content one step further

When asked how large **Tak Fung** believes his new racing game, *Forever Drive*, will be within days of its launch on the App Store, he imagines a track so long (and growing so rapidly) that no one will ever reach the finish line. Fung is the CEO of Supermono Studios. If you couldn't tell, he's the ambitious type.

Forever Drive is a simple top-down racing game that includes a single track, a map editor and a sly hook. Whatever users construct – good or not – is added to the game's highway. The more people create, the bigger the game becomes.

That takes trust, allowing anyone to make not a mod or an expansion, but a part of the core experience.

Dave Ferner, Supermono Studios' art director, describes himself and Fung as pragmatists. "We're up against studios with infinite resources," he says. They have no option but to be clever – Supermono Studios has only five employees, some of them part-time. From that perspective, asking players to help build the track isn't a gamble, it's a necessity.

"If you give people enough control to be creative, you also give them enough to make stuff that's rubbish"

Fung and Ferner believe many people will be willing. Millions of iPhone owners have a couple of minutes to spare while online, at work or in the bathroom. Even if a percentage of one per cent take that break to contribute a section of road, *Forever Drive*'s track will be longer than any of its competitors'.

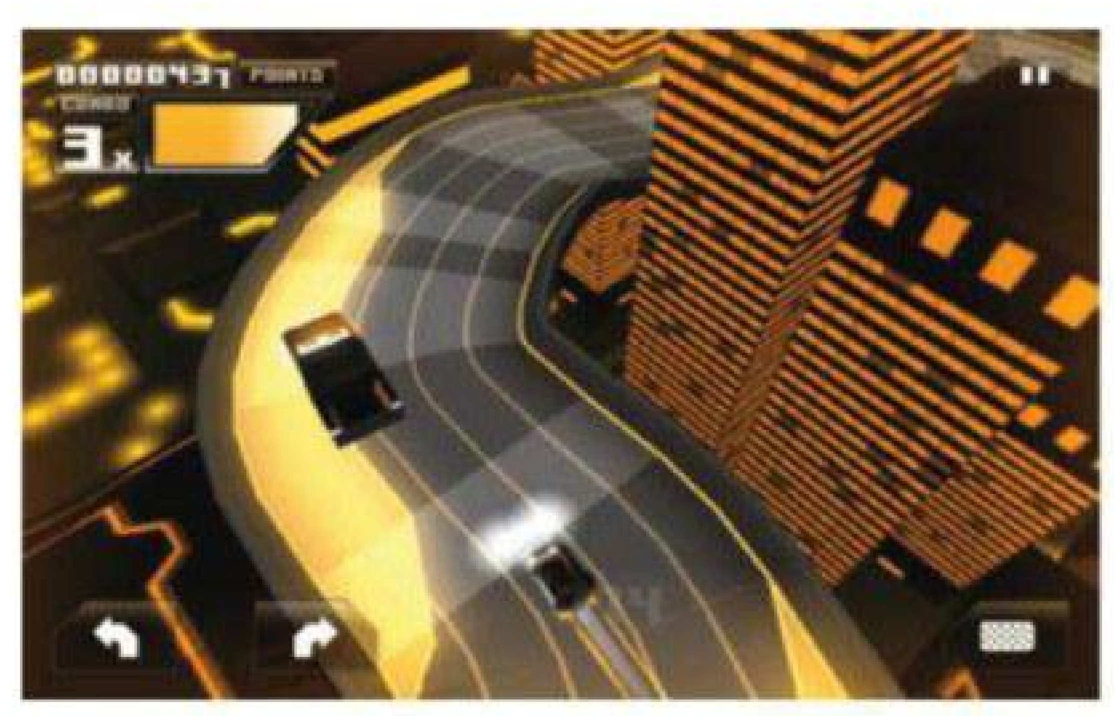
The studio has opted to release the game as free-to-play, knocking down the largest barrier to entry: price. There are no tricks. The racing and the building are unlocked from the start; one does not require the use of the other. Supermono has gone out of its way to make the construction process fast and painless: anyone can supply a slab of pavement. Dragging a finger along the screen maps out a section of track, while buildings and landmarks are plotted with quick taps.

And all the heavy lifting, the actual assembly of *Forever Drive* – the parts most people won't want to do – is left to algorithms. The first algorithm appends each length of track on to the tail end of another, and that to another, so that every contributor's hunk of road is combined in a matter of seconds. The second redistributes the result, the almost endless highway, to every *Forever Drive* user.

"This is a risky game," admits Fung, who doubles as the game's graphics coder. Despite all of his team's work, the concept just might not click. And yet, like Ferner before him, Fung's voice doesn't lower or tremble when he says "risky". It sounds like someone greeting a friend.

Perhaps because Fung knows risk well. In the early 2000s the young coder learned his trade at Lionhead on an untitled project that, at the time, sounded like a real hazard. It became the original *Fable*. More recently he coded *EpicWin*, a pseudo-game which sought to transform daily routine into a litany of roleplaying activities. It became the number one Productivity App in 16 countries.

A big part of minimising risk is ensuring the majority of user-generated content that players encounter is actually worth playing. "There's this delicate balancing act," Ferner says. "If you give people enough control to be truly creative, you also give them enough control to make stuff that's just rubbish… [In *Forever Drive*] it's fairly hard to make something awful."



The game has been in public beta, but a full version is available on the App Store

The AI alone plots obstructions on the tracks, and buildings and roads can only be modified so much, to maintain cohesion between tracks. On top of that, there is a second failsafe: the voting system. Between each section of track, AI takes control of the car, while an overlay appears asking the player to vote what they just played up or down. The game's algorithm puts the best-rated tracks in the front, relegating the worst to the rear. The voting also serves as a loading screen without interrupting the game's flow.




From top: Tak Fung, studio CEO, and Dave Ferner, art director

If everything clicks, the userbase will construct the road, the drivers will up-vote the best bits, and more and more newcomers will be attracted to the project because it will constantly be improving itself. "There will always be something new to see out the window," Fung says.

At that point, the game will ostensibly be out of Supermono's control. Fung and Ferner can add new modes and construction pieces, but the highway, the actual core game, will belong to the players – the people who created it. ■



Racing against the clock on *Forever Drive*'s unending streets levels your car up and unlocks additional paint jobs and buildings

POLE POSITION
At the Game Developers Conference 2011, Supermono presented a deferred rendering engine for iOS, or what Fung calls a program that "shows lots of lights on screen at the same time." The tech demo got a surprising amount of buzz. Whatever game the studio built next would have to flaunt the novel illumination effects. "City. Night. Top view. Racer," rattles Ferner. "From that point we ignored the graphics for like a month or two. With no lighting, the gameplay sort of dictated itself." The result was *Drive Forever*, a rough 2D racing game that would become *Forever Drive*.

bit.ly/oy3gJX
A look at Supermono's previous release, *EpicWin*

Exploring virtual words

The Writers' Guild revises its guidance to scribes making a living from videogames

The Writers' Guild of Great Britain has updated its guidelines for anyone working or hoping to work on the writing side of games, as well as anyone whose responsibilities involve hiring writers. Sections include a breakdown of precisely what the job involves in 2011, the different types of writers who might be brought on to the project, and the all-important rates that people should expect for their work.

This an important document for both writers and producers, not least because writing remains a very misunderstood part of many projects.

"While there are more professional writers working in games, there is often still a lack of understanding of the resources needed to tell a story," explains freelance narrative director **Andrew S Walsh**. "Teams have to be signed up to the idea and committed to tell the story across design, art, animation, production and programming. It's not sufficient just to have a professional games writer – although a games writer can help to point out some of these problems – but you need a narrative pipeline and resources in place to tell the story once it's written."

> "It's not sufficient just to have a games writer; you need a narrative pipeline and resources in place"

One thing the document doesn't focus on in detail is how to get a writing job in the industry in the first place – tricky, since it's not a position frequently advertised. Game writers often come from other writing backgrounds, bringing in novelists, journalists and screenwriters, and that experience is important. In most cases, though, it's up to them to chase the work, at least initially, as well as take time to adapt to the specific demands of non-linear storytelling.

For more established writers, agencies are increasingly moving in to handle this element, including Sidelines, which specialises in scribes with experience of game writing, like Jim Swallow (*Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, Battlestar Galactica) and Tom Jubert (*Driver: San Francisco*, *Penumbra*). We'll likely be seeing other similarly styled organisations in future, as the market expands and specific skills become increasingly relevant.

"Writing to companies can get attention… the wrong sort if you don't find who to write to, or don't spend time on your cover letter," Walsh warns. "A more personal approach is to take yourself to conferences where you can meet contacts personally. It's what you know *and* who you know that matters. Get experience – publish short stories, put on plays, enter competitions and look for opportunities to meet people."

At the moment, the role of the dedicated game writer is still somewhat in flux. Some companies have dedicated staff members to handle the work, others contract freelancers for specific projects, while others still use a mix – using one team to script a game's cutscenes and named characters, for example, with freelance contributors brought in for smaller elements such as extra jokes, in-game emails, enemy barks and ambient dialogue.



Andrew S Walsh, narrative director

PAY PURVIEW
The Writers Guild has researched the current rates being paid to writers in the industry over the past year, and recommends these price bands. More experienced writers, especially those contacted directly by large companies, can obviously expect higher rates for their work. Localisation/editing/copy writing: £300-£350 per day. Narrative/dialogue work: £350-£450 per day. Original material: £450+ per day. The difference between the latter options is that, for narrative/dialogue work, the writer will primarily be working with the company's IP, such as scripting an existing character. Original material factors in the lack of royalties paid on most projects.

The exact role of the writer will also vary dramatically from project to project, but is increasingly stretching out beyond simply writing for a game to include additional DLC content, tie-in books or comics and marketing materials such as scripted trailers. The Guild guidelines cover these and many other parts of the job, and while they don't guarantee that new writers especially will be able to demand its suggested rates, they at least offer a baseline of what to both offer and expect while hashing out contracts.

Along with these guidelines, the Guild is also working to promote the best in British game writing in its annual awards. This year's shortlisted writers are Splash Damage's Ed Stern for *Brink*, former journalist turned comic author Kieron Gillen for the online edutainment game *The Curfew*, and the team of Ninja Theory's Tameem Antoniades and Alex Garland for their revamped version of Journey To The West, *Enslaved*. The results will be announced on November 16.

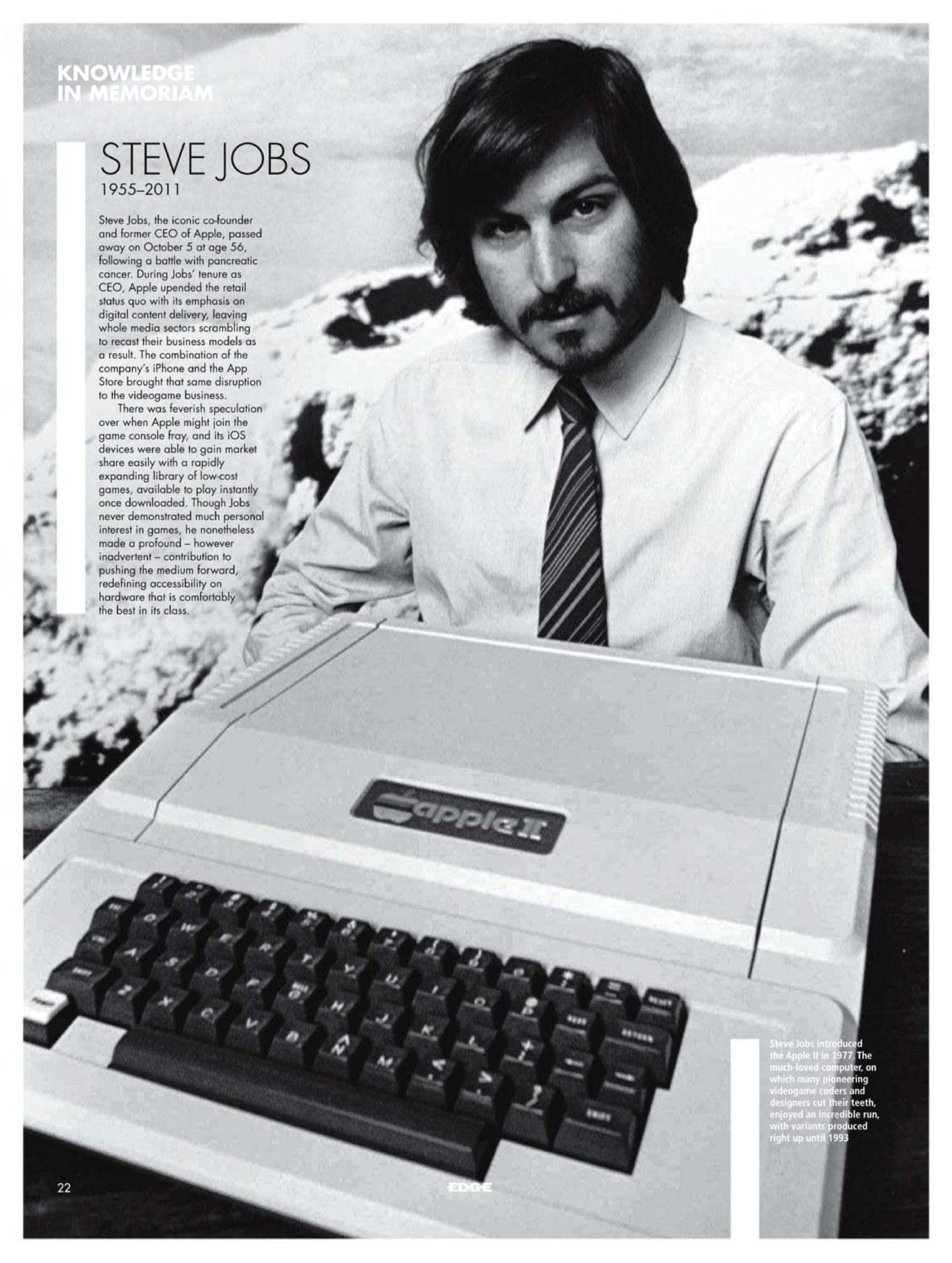
Unlike many similar awards, writers don't have to be members of the Guild to put their names forward and be considered. The only restrictions are that the game has to have landed within the correct timeframe, and be either a British-made game or have a British writer handling the words. Last year's nominations went to *Red Dead Redemption*, *Risen* and *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, with Rockstar's western shooter finally walking away with the prize. For more information on this and other activities, visit www.writersguild.org.uk. The guidelines themselves can be downloaded as a PDF (bit.ly/pBfzKQ). ■

QUEEN FROM EVERY FUCKING HICK TOWN IN AMERICA
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STEVE JOBS
1955–2011

Steve Jobs, the iconic co-founder and former CEO of Apple, passed away on October 5 at age 56, following a battle with pancreatic cancer. During Jobs' tenure as CEO, Apple upended the retail status quo with its emphasis on digital content delivery, leaving whole media sectors scrambling to recast their business models as a result. The combination of the company's iPhone and the App Store brought that same disruption to the videogame business.

There was feverish speculation over when Apple might join the game console fray, and its iOS devices were able to gain market share easily with a rapidly expanding library of low-cost games, available to play instantly once downloaded. Though Jobs never demonstrated much personal interest in games, he nonetheless made a profound – however inadvertent – contribution to pushing the medium forward, redefining accessibility on hardware that is comfortably the best in its class.



Steve Jobs introduced the Apple II in 1977. The much-loved computer, on which many pioneering videogame coders and designers cut their teeth, enjoyed an incredible run, with variants produced right up until 1993

"MODERN WARFARE SHOULD BE VERY AFRAID"

XBOX 360 THE OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE

FEEL THE BATTLE

BATTLEFIELD 3

28.10.11



























BATTLEFIELD.COM/UK

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"The *Final Fantasy* brand has been greatly damaged."

Square Enix CEO **Yoichi Wada** on the troubled PC launch of *Final Fantasy XIV*

"I know it's strange for me to say this, but I can only describe this game as amazing. Over **a hundred staff have been working on it** for five years. It's the biggest game we've worked on to date."

Shigeru Miyamoto's pre-TGS presentation has him gushing as much as us over Link's latest epic



"Every game starts with me off writing a two-pager that the leads then tear to shreds. Originally the game started off with **the Locust having evolved into a water species...**"

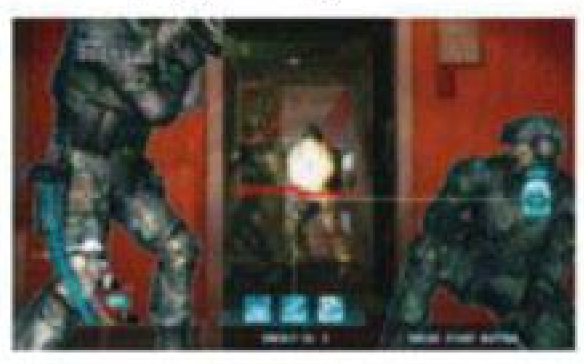
Epic's **Cliff Bleszinski** tells us how he nearly ruined *Gears Of War 3*

"I have a complete addiction to that game. It is sick."

Megan Fox on her favourite pastime, *Halo Reach*. Sick is good, right?

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Operation GHOST
Manufacturer Sega

Sega's 2004 lightgun game *Ghost Squad* was a solid arcade blaster that was graced with a Wii port in 2007 before disappearing. The sequel, *Ghost Squad Evolution*, was a similar slice of down-to-business target practice. It's a surprise, then, some four years later, to find not only a second sequel, but one with such a glitzy and glamorous cabinet.

Operation GHOST's bombastic presentation and design flair announces Sega staking a claim in the military shooter genre, one that could easily find its way to home consoles if its arcade popularity proves it worthwhile.

Enemies' appearances onscreen are pre-empted by one of many wafer-thin rows of LEDs surrounding the frame, giving you a valuable heads-up on the opposition amid the shootouts.

Sega's latest RingWide tech fuels the visual fury, which continues the series' penchant for athletic on-rails progression as your character ducks, dives and pounces around the environments.

A chest-beater of a cabinet, *Operation GHOST* matches its gameplay thrills with some showbiz frills. A big, bold blaster **equipped to catch eyes and coins.**





My favourite game
Peter Serafinowicz

The man whose work gave us the legendary Buttertendo (it's better than a box!) discusses a lifelong passion for playing

Peter Serafinowicz is a comedian, writer and actor, his CV spanning the sitcom Spaced, the spoof science programme Look Around You and Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace, for which he voiced Darth Maul. He's appeared these pages before, in **E**156's roundtable discussion with Simon Pegg, Graham Linehan and Charlie Brooker – and, as we discover, he's not sure much has changed in the intervening six years.

What is your earliest gaming memory?
My uncle was a huge influence on me – he was a kind of polymath, hugely clever, a talented painter and photographer, and he was at the forefront of getting personal computers. The first thing I remember – at home, anyway – was him having a BBC Micro, playing a BASIC game called *Kingdom*. He also took me to an arcade in Liverpool when I was about eight, and we played *Space Wars*. I loved *Donkey Kong* so much that I remember one night my mum tucking me in and I was describing the animation of Mario as he climbed up the ladder – he kind of bends over and his bum sticks out.

What systems did you own growing up?
The first thing I had was a Commodore VIC-20 – that had 3.5K of RAM! I suppose I always went for the underdogs – my mates had ZX Spectrums and I had a VIC-20. Then I got an Atari 800, this beautifully designed, beige teletype machine with brown keys and orange function buttons down the side. But it wasn't supported very well over here, and I envied people with C64s because that was like a next-gen machine.

PETER ET CETERA
Born in 1972, Serafinowicz is best known for acting but his career has taken him down numerous paths. His Darth Maul voice work led to a role in South Park; Terry Wogan liked his impression of him so much he invited him on to his radio show; and he overdubbed Pelé in an English-language Viagra advert. He also directed the video for Hot Chip's I Feel Better, and composed almost all of the music for Look Around You.



And what about now?
The iPhone gives you that little fix of games. There's a great one with a really unmemorable name: *Dungeon Raid*. It's a match-three kind of game but it's an RPG as well, and really super-hard. You can get quite far and then suddenly, if you haven't planned ahead, you'll die, and there's something old-school about it that I like. It's great having ZX Spectrum and C64 emulators on there too. It's like: "Wow, I'm totally living in the future." And *Jetpack Joyride* is brilliant.

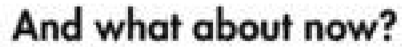
Six years ago you told us about your frustration with writing in games. Has it improved in the interim?
I don't think so. I don't think much has changed in terms of story and realistic dialogue. I remember I mentioned *Zelda: The Wind Waker* and that's an interesting one because it's not spoken, it's just text on the screen, and I find that far more engaging than listening to a guy who's been stuck in a voiceover booth for ten hours who just wants to get through it. I'm not really a fan – although it's an incredible achievement in some ways – of *GTAIV*. I hate all those missions and the scripted bits. If I want to watch a really shit film there are plenty I can watch. I want to be able to jump in and explore the world.

"I went to the games BAFTAs and it was amazing to meet a lot of my… my heroes, really"

Have you played anything recently that gets it right?
A recent one that is excellent for voice-acting is *El Shaddai*. It features Jason Isaacs, and he's brilliant, and I was just totally absorbed by it. You play this angel who's got to gather up all the fallen angels, so it's all very psychedelic, religious – it's a really trippy game. It's nuts, and you're suspending disbelief at this mad situation and this dialogue, which is cod-metaphysical weirdness, and it really works. They got brilliant actors and directed them really well.

Do you ever think about getting involved yourself?
I'd love to be involved in creating a game. I'd like to help design it, and write it, and get actors in that I thought were amazing. But the world I'm in, and the game world – they never really collide. I went to the games BAFTAs a couple of years ago and it was amazing to meet a lot of my… my heroes, really.

What's your favourite game of all time?
Wind Waker. It's so beautiful. I remember when *Dragon's Lair* came out, seeing it on TV and thinking: 'Oh, Jesus Christ, you can play a cartoon!' Then you got to the arcade and very quickly realised you weren't actually playing anything at all. *Wind Waker* is like you're controlling an incredible cartoon. It's a huge game, you really care about [Link], his sister, you meet such friendly characters, and the baddies are really bad. It's funny as well – the script is super-witty. The music is just incredible, and I bought the soundtrack from Japan. Just talking about it now, I've got goosebumps. ■





Serafinowicz's voice appears in *Star Wars: Battlefront II*. "I didn't specifically do it – they took it from the film. Another zero dollars for me"

bit.ly/r75sWk
More gaming talk with Brian Butterfield's alter ego

WEB SITE

Legends of Localisation
bit.ly/nsRRGc

The legacy of *Super Mario Bros* needs no detailing, but the differences between its US and Japanese versions – charted by translator Mato Tree as part of an ongoing 'Legends Of Localisation' series – are worth investigating. Mato "thought it'd be neat to use my professional experience to actually take deeper looks into the translations and localizations of some games", and the expert eye he brings to this particular cross-comparison is priceless. Did you know, for example, that the North American instruction booklet for the game paints a more violent picture of Bowser's minions? Mato doesn't just deliver nuggets of trivia, he provides a succinct, revelatory breakdown of the games' history and the discovery of its hidden treasures.





VIDEO

Resonance cascade
bit.ly/pYPFbM

No one does recreation like the *Minecraft* crowd. The Lego of the virtual world and a proving ground for obsessive-compulsive creators, it's proved a versatile sandbox that can do everything from shot-for-shot re-enactments (bit.ly/nZZ0hR) to a spot-on recreation of the USS Enterprise. YouTube user dewtroid has harnessed the game's powers to honour… games. A block-by-block recreation of the opening minutes of *Half-Life*, with each moment delivered on cue, this is homage taken to the limits of perfectionism and detail.

WEB GAME

Legends Of Yore
www.legendsofyore.com

Legends Of Yore is an indie Java game fuelled by nostalgia and executed with flair. Its NES-era top-down aesthetic is indistinguishable from its inspirations and could slot invisibly into the era to which it pays homage. The gameplay is even simpler: everything is click controlled with barely a second of downtime between battling, questing and inventory navigation. Want to explore a dungeon? Click the stairs. Want to slay a beast? Click it like you mean it. It plays out like a solution to retrogaming's slow-paced adventuring for the ADD generation. Like *Half Minute Hero*, it's simultaneously old-fashioned and energetic. Available for iPhone as well as a free PC download (with pay-to-play kicking in, quite generously, only once you hit level 20), *Legends Of Yore* is a heroic throwback with heart.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

A sprinkling of things that tugged at our attention during the production of **E**234

BOOK

Ready Player One (Ernest Cline, Century)

The year is 2044. A billionaire videogame designer has died, bequeathing his fortune to whoever can solve a series of riddles and puzzles. Wade Watts – an avid gamer just barely staying afloat in school – links up with four other MMOG players to try to win the challenge. The book's premise dovetails nicely with the subject matter, since gamers are accustomed to solving challenges for points and virtual (or, in this case, real) treasure. Author Ernest Cline's credentials are solid, having written the film Fanboys about a group of Star Wars zealots. If you feel any nostalgia for Atari and D&D, Ready Player One is a love letter to your childhood.



continue

Region-free Vita
Prepare to get your Os and Xs mixed up

A new forum
Come and say hello on **Edge**'s Web site

OnLive
That noise? The sound of words being eaten

Icons
All present: Drake, Link, Fenix, Batman

quit

Vita battery life
Three to five hours? Make them count

Trailer dubstep
Clanking industrial *so* suits Renaissance Italy

Preorder DLC
We want *all* the Batmans, dammit!

Dark Souls help
What's that? Jump into *this* bottomless pit?

TWEETS

Can't say much about what I saw of *Mass Effect 3* at #Bioware. But I presumably CAN say it's going to kick your motherhonking ass.
@jasonkapalka

This likely means nothing: the title of my generation's defining video game started with "super"; for today's kids, the word is "angry".
@mrgan

Why is Lord Sugar all over the TV speaking about Steve Jobs? It's like calling Shakin' Stevens in to talk about the death of Elvis. #isad
@Jim_Baxter

I can't stop dancing today!! Aww! Pow! [ ]
@Swery65

Enough is ENOUGH! I have had it with these monkey-fighting GHOSTS in this Monday to Friday GAME! goo.gl/RuUk #darksouls
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DISPATCHES DECEMBER

Within Dispatches this month, Dialogue sees the **Edge** readership question the animosity of high-street buyers towards game sales tactics, empathise with minor villains in *Skyrim*, recognise the little things devs do to make games great, and ponder what choice means through the lens of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*. In Perspective, **Steven Poole** doubts gamification will be a panacea for all woes, **Leigh Alexander** asks if stories are games' true calling, and tome raider **Brian Howe** tackles a bundle of tie-in novels based on some unexpected titles.





Issue 233

Dialogue

Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Our letter of the month wins a 3DS

The shopkeeper's lament

In my time as a gamer, it's become apparent to me how bizarrely opposed people seem to be to retail stores that provide them the very games they take pleasure in.

Perhaps I should explain myself before I go on. I've worked in game-based retail for a few years now. I'm no stranger to annoying forms of upselling and other sales strategies to get customers to spend more of their hard-earned cash than they intended to, mainly because I'm probably one of those annoying sales assistants who has offered you these upsells to begin with.

I don't deny that a lot of the time this can be extremely frustrating and detract from the high-street retail experience, which is fast going downhill. But I feel I can offer a unique perspective, being a big consumer of games myself and also having been on the other side of the coin, selling these products to other people. I've read many angry letters in **Edge**, in other games mags and on Web sites about how people feel as if they have been conned by sales staff, and I've also dealt with the unpleasant backlash first-hand when I've offered preorder incentives and upsells to people buying games from my store.

I just can't for the life of me understand why people act as if we're their enemy. I have a job I've been told to do; it's always the company's first and foremost interest to make money – this is Business Economics 101. But the idea is that in exchange for your cash, we give you something you want.

This extends to upselling at tills. For example, if someone is buying a console, it's part of my job to offer them something compatible with the console they're buying. This might be an extra controller, a headset or another similar accessory. I wouldn't ever (nor am I told to) offer someone a random DVD to go with their purchase, since it's not applicable to what they're buying. How am I to know an extra controller or some Xbox Live/PSN points aren't things the customer would want? It's just an offer. Customers are free to decline, as many do, and you can also decline while maintaining some sense of politeness and not acting as if I've just gravely insulted every sensibility you hold.

To me, this is a valid extension of the customer service experience and not something that should be demonised. Can't lowly sales assistants and the average game-buying customer just learn to get along in retail harmony?
Henry Baker

True, good manners cost not a jot – there's no excuse for rudeness. The Hug Your Local Game Retailer Today campaign begins here. Unless your local game retailer attempts to sell you some kind of extended warranty, of course, in which case all bets are off.

Choice thinking

When I bought a copy of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* from the shops, I was informed by the well-trained staff that I could get the strategy guide to go with my game. Aware that there were multiple ways of completing objectives, I disregarded this offer swiftly, and announced that I'd make my own choices, because it would be more fun that way.

Several hours into the game, I realised my choices weren't so fun. Intending to take a 'ghost' approach, I would often find myself loading a previous save file due to a mistake. I could have chosen to continue and gun down an entire room of enemies, but that's not how I do things... or is it? Because I triggered the alarm, albeit by mistake, by attempting to hack a door, and if it was real life, I would have to stand by my decision.

I understand it is my wish to play in a specific way that creates this problem. I don't want to rely on a save, but I feel I'm not alone when it comes to these choices and the obsessive loading. *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* provides alternative routes well and has some excellent long-term decisions within the game. But when it comes to missions and action areas, I fear the option to choose is soon overshadowed by the chance to 're-choose'.

If such options were removed, I believe a richer experience would be created. Take moments such as the last race in a tournament that can't be restarted without going back to the first race; a risky escape, having used your last save ages ago on *Hitman*; or any attempt to reach a new safe house after a mission within *Far Cry 2*. All of these examples are better for the fact that if I fail, I suffer a setback or must accept defeat.

What I'm trying to say is: I don't want a strategy guide or a save system that allows me to try different strategies. Both allow for a change in thinking, especially the save system, which is one area I wish wasn't open to choice. Among all the methods, choices and routes that create my ending, I would like one more input into my games: my irreversible mistakes.
Dale Wassall

We admire your commitment to the Iron Man cause. Perhaps permadeath should be an option in all games? If you're playing on a 360, you could just remove your hard drive if you really want to punish yourself.

Detailed praise

We've all had epic experiences with games, most of which have been well documented: stepping out into the world after escaping prison in *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* or the fatal encounter with the nuclear bomb in *Call Of Duty 4*, for instance.

I, however, have found some of the more subtle parts of games to be the most profound. In some cases, what seemed to

be glitches when first encountered turned out to be great attention to detail.

I'll start with *Grand Theft Auto IV*. I was speeding down a road and then, as I came to its end, I applied the brakes. Once the speed was reduced enough, I pressed the handbrake to kick the back end out as I went around the corner. The handbrake failed to engage and I ended up going straight over the pavement and headlong into a building. I was puzzled as to why this happened and decided it may have been a glitch. It turned out that Niko was on his phone while I was attempting the corner, and he physically couldn't hold his phone against his ear while operating the handbrake at the same time, hence my car ended up crumpled against a wall.

Another example is *No More Heroes* on the Wii, and Travis Touchdown's phone. The first time it rang and he answered, I could hear a muted voice from the speaker of the Wii Remote. I held it against my ear to make out what was being said. It dawned on me that I holding the Wii Remote like a mobile phone. It was inspired and instinctive use of the hardware.

These subtle details that developers take the time not only to think of, but also to implement should be given great praise. They provide games with an injection of creative originality that is always welcome.
Jon Brown

For an enchanting synergy between hardware and software, and a further – final? – fulfilment of Wii's potential, you'll probably want to try a bit of *Skyward Sword* (see p94). Your new 3DS should give you a few additional ways to play, too.

Magic, murder and maturity

I just read your *Skyrim* preview and a small wave of sadness came over me. You briefly described encountering a young magician trying to raise the dead, whereupon you greedily sliced him up with a few quick taps. No doubt his ghost-cat provoked you, and I'm sure the intention of the game was for this bad guy to be taken down without judgement. It also provided a nice explanation of basic combat to the reader.

So what made me sad? Well, I read Ursula Le Guin's Earthsea books for the first time not too long ago. With its large world, open to exploration; its dragons and sorcery; its heroic quests; and its epic battles, that world sounds not too different to *Skyrim*, and I wouldn't be surprised if the designers have drawn some inspiration from the classic fantasy series. The main character – called Ged, as you may know – begins his journey into manhood by attempting to raise the dead, because he essentially wants to impress his friends. It all ends pretty badly, and he spends most of the rest of his life undoing the evil he did that day. Perhaps this is the rich tapestry of *Skyrim* at its most complex and moral, but I did feel a touch mournful that you killed Ged before he could go on all his best adventures.

I did feel a touch mournful that you killed Ged before he could go on all his best adventures

On a related note, this weekend I had the opportunity to attend the Eurogamer Expo at Earl's Court, where the *Skyrim* demo was available to play. I was put off by the several-hours-long queue, so I didn't get a chance to sample the delights of Bethesda's game.

I found the 'over 18s' area was one of the most peculiar things about the event, though. Past bouncers and driving licence checks, you can gain access to the 'mature' games of the event. In this case, the prominent titles were *Call Of Duty* and *Ninja Gaiden*. This made me wonder if the lesson we seem most keen to teach our children is: 'Murder is OK, so long as there's not too much blood'. Not a bad motto for a professional killer, I imagine. Apparently, mindless and remorseless violence permeates so many titles these days that we no longer even remark on it.

Still, perhaps I am judging *Skyrim* too quickly from a few brief sentences. Maybe it really is the Earthsea of videogames and I should stop grumbling and moralising and go preorder it.
Joe Bain

Hey, you can't let these magicians just go around raising the dead all over the place. Haven't you heard of overpopulation? ■


Dale Wassall ponders how much choice is too much when it comes to the new *Deus Ex*

ONLINE OFFLINE

Your responses to the topics we invite you to discuss on our Web site at next-gen.biz and our Facebook page.

How can Game increase its appeal?

Take a long hard look at their god-awful pricing! Why would anyone buy from them when within five minutes online you can find the same game at least £10 cheaper?
Steve Deacon, via Facebook

Personality, engagement and the personal touch is now the only way for them to distinguish themselves and they are failing badly at it.
Philip McAllister, via Facebook

They stopped feeling like a place where I could enjoy my hobby and started treating me like a cow to be milked. Gamestation is the same but with facial piercings.
Dean Bacon, via Facebook

Actually have people on the tills instead of a queue halfway out the shop because you care more about all the extra tat you want to sell us.
David Crane, via Facebook

If I wasn't pestered by several staff members every time I entered the place on what I'm looking for, if I'd like to preorder anything and would I like a strategy guide for a game I don't own, then maybe I'd still shop there. Going into Game now is an ordeal.
Aodhán Collins, via Facebook

Game could increase their appeal to me by shutting shop.
Jamie Salmon, via Facebook


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STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Gamification will not solve the world's problems, but games themselves could help the process along

Making coffee is really difficult. You have to grind the beans to the right coarseness, then tamp down the coffee, connect the tray to the machine, and so on; and all the while your customer's patience gauge is rapidly emptying; and by the time the espresso is ready you've forgotten what she ordered so you put milk froth into what was supposed to be an Americano, and so you have to start all over again; on top of all of which you are stressed because there is a custody hearing with your ex-husband and your daughter in 30 minutes for which you absolutely cannot be late.

This is not real life; it's *Cart Life*, a buggy but brilliant 'retail simulator' by Richard Hofmeier. Having talked to real street vendors about their experiences, Hofmeier synthesised fact and fiction into a profoundly unusual and moving videogame of low-res greyscale visuals (*Dun Darach* meets *Canabalt*), chiptune music and devastating humanism.

In her egotistical manifesto for 'gamification', Reality Is Broken, Jane McGonigal makes an extraordinary claim. "Reality," she writes, "is too easy". That's why we need to fill it with the 'voluntary obstacles' of games, to make things more interesting. Nothing could be a more fatuously perfect example of blinkered privilege, the digital utopianism of the materially comfortable. Reality might be 'too easy' for McGonigal; it is anything but for Melanie, *Cart Life*'s coffee-hut heroine, or the other freely playable character, Andrus, who runs a newspaper stall. They have to make a living a dollar at a time, while figuring out how to feed themselves, look after a cat or child, brave the Kafkasque ambience of City Hall, and at the end of each day dream troubling dreams of their new life in the unforgiving city.

Another property that reality has, according to McGonigal's zany metaphysics, is that it is 'unproductive'. Only a game, like *World Of Warcraft*, offers the kind of 'blissful productivity' that she defines as "the sense of being deeply immersed in work that produces immediate and obvious results". Well, Melanie and Andrus in *Cart Life* are engaged in work that demands an immersed concentration and produces immediate results: they make a dollar or two whenever they sell a newspaper, or a cup of coffee or milk, or maybe even a hot dog, but their lives are still somehow not as blissful as promised by McGonigal's Panglossian advert for the virtualised late-capitalist work ethic.

> The pseudo-philosophers of 'gamification' want to make more of real life like a boring job

This is not to say that *Cart Life* is merely a dour denunciation of the working conditions of modern street entrepreneurs. It is an authentic game of resource management and exploration, with oddball humour tucked away in unexpected places (the janitor at City Hall says of the clerk: "Her desire to maintain a sterile work environment is simply perverse") and touching tableaux of friendship, camaraderie, and even love. The imagination with which Hofmeier has 'gamified' the characters' lives for our interaction, meanwhile, is impressive. Coffee is made by means of tiny *WarioWare*-style game-fragments using the cursor keys. Meanwhile, each morning Andrus must collect his new batch of newspapers, fold them, and arrange them on his stall, which is done by typing in repetitive phrases that appear on the screen: 'Folding again', 'Leave a nice crease', 'They will be easy to reach now', and many more. Type one in incorrectly and you tear a newspaper, which you then can't sell. This simple mechanic is surprisingly effective: by being made to type in his thoughts, we come closer to sharing Andrus's aspirations, joining him in a tiny hymn of hope. He might currently live in a dingy motel on the city's outskirts, with a cat that he has to smuggle past reception, but we dream of a better life for him.

I have previously criticised the 'employment paradigm' in videogames: you act as the employee of an in-game character or the designer, performing dull repetitive tasks to earn currency, and then buying equipment or promotions that will help you perform more dull repetitive tasks. The pseudo-philosophers of 'gamification' want to make more of real life like a boring job. Richard Hofmeier, on the other hand, has made a real job into a videogame, one that is not only interesting to play but that changes your outlook on reality. I know who wins that contest.

One of the glibly tossed-off future possibilities of gamification presented by McGonigal is that large-scale crowdsourcing games could help 'end poverty'. You know that a new fad herbal supplement or therapy technique is bullshit when it promises to cure absolutely everything, from shyness to baldness to cancer; in the same way, McGonigal's prophecy that gamification will wash away all the world's ills makes it obvious that it is cultural quackery. I don't think Hofmeier's *Cart Life* will end poverty either, but in its superbly intelligent way of making you walk a mile in the shoes of the poor, it has a far better chance at least of increasing empathy with the downtrodden. That is more than a library full of gamification moonshine will ever accomplish.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net

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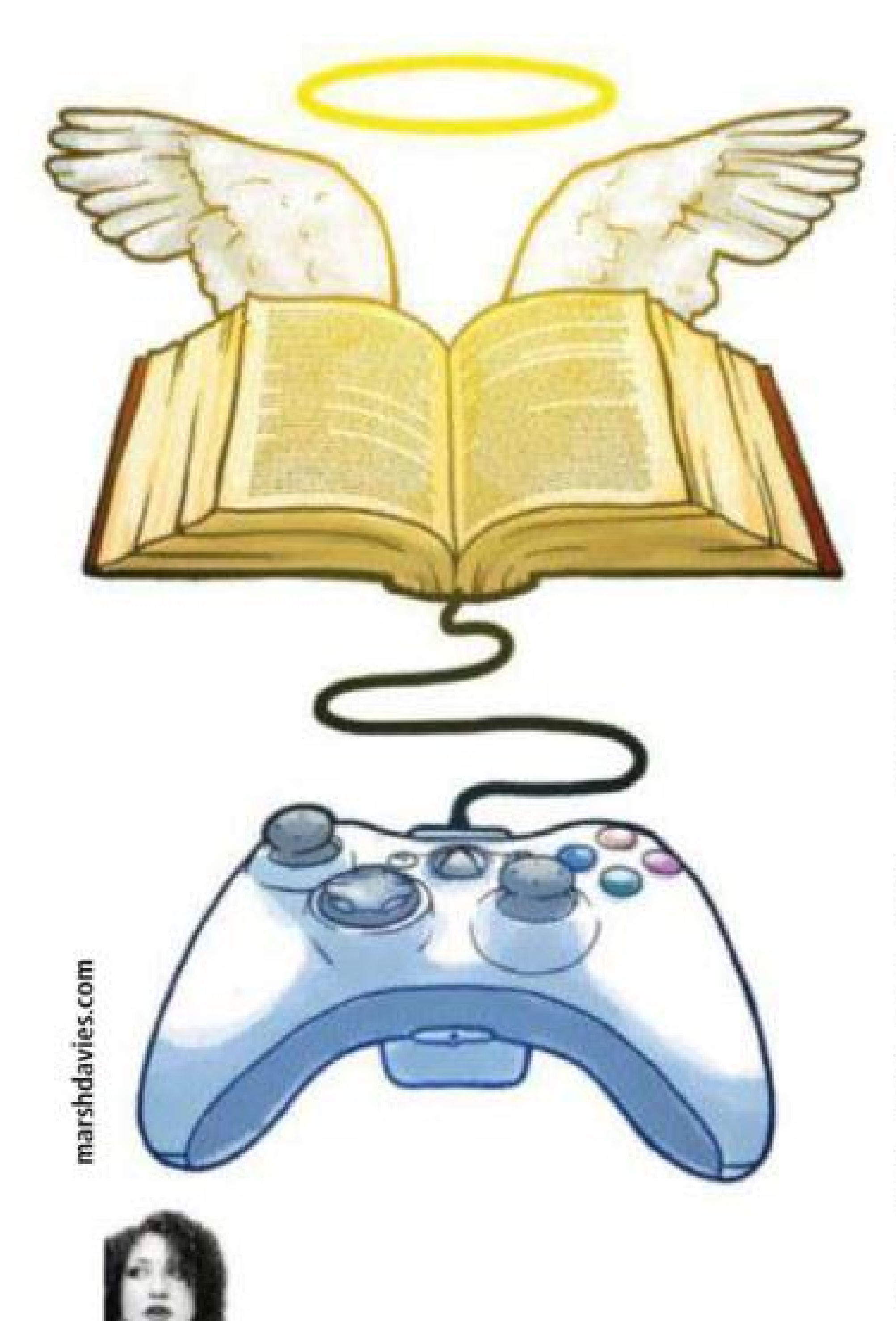
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LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

Questioning the assumption that it's the telling of stories that is gaming's highest calling

Listening to gaming's most arch supporters, particularly the critical press, you'd think that what we want most – indeed, what videogames most *need* to move forward – is to be a storytelling medium. At least, that's the definition that sounds best when, for example, we're confronted with a nonbeliever. "Aren't those things incredibly violent?" blinks your elderly neighbour, and you say: "Some are, but the ones I'm interested in tell great stories."

Or when you tell someone in a bar that your job is videogames, and they ask if you "just play videogames all day" in a fashion that seems derogatory. As their incredulous gaze finds you an adult-child still spending hours on *Mario*, you hasten to explain that you're interested in games as the next great narrative medium. You compare games to the film industry – not just because both are valid modern entertainment, but because, as you tell your saucer-eyed acquaintance, both have their horrible, obvious, explosion-laden mainstream entries and their thoughtful, well-crafted gems. That tell great stories, of course.

Always about the stories, as if it's that element that will convince everybody of gaming's natural greatness. Certainly, we become excited about gameplay advances, but there's almost an inherent cultural disdain toward the onward march of technological polish, as if triple-A fidelity automatically implies a loss of spiritual authenticity.

It's difficult to tell whether, when we demand great stories, we're looking ahead to some imagined glory and legitimacy for videogames, to a day when discussing our work will bring admiring nods instead of quizzical blinking. Or are we looking back, to some youthful escapism with the games that raised us, an experience that can't possibly be recreated without the lens of nostalgia?

Either way, it doesn't actually make a lot of sense, when we look at the shape of the gaming landscape and the kinds of products the market increasingly favours. A singleplayer campaign is generally viewed as training for the multiplayer. If the idea of an authored experience had begun to enter disfavour in the last generation, it's an endangered species in this one.

> There are RPGs that aim to be narrative-driven, but they cling steadfastly to ancient tropes

The plot of a game is increasingly a rig on which to hang action sequences, individual experiences designed to be breathtaking, adrenaline-fuelled or scary. There are RPGs that aim to be narrative-driven, but they cling steadfastly to ancient tropes, no deeper than the traditions of high fantasy and sci-fi. And is there anyone who, entering a bookstore looking for a literary experience, heads straight for the paperbacks about dragons and spaceships? Well, maybe RPG developers do, and that's half the problem, but that's an issue for another time.

The triple-A market is more competitive than ever. Design must take primacy; games must be made that feel good to play so that people will take them online and keep playing them, and buy more content later. Genre is iron-girdled and rule-bound, at least among the games that earn money. Few among the major players are interested in straying from those established rulesets over something as diaphanous and unproven as 'narrative'.

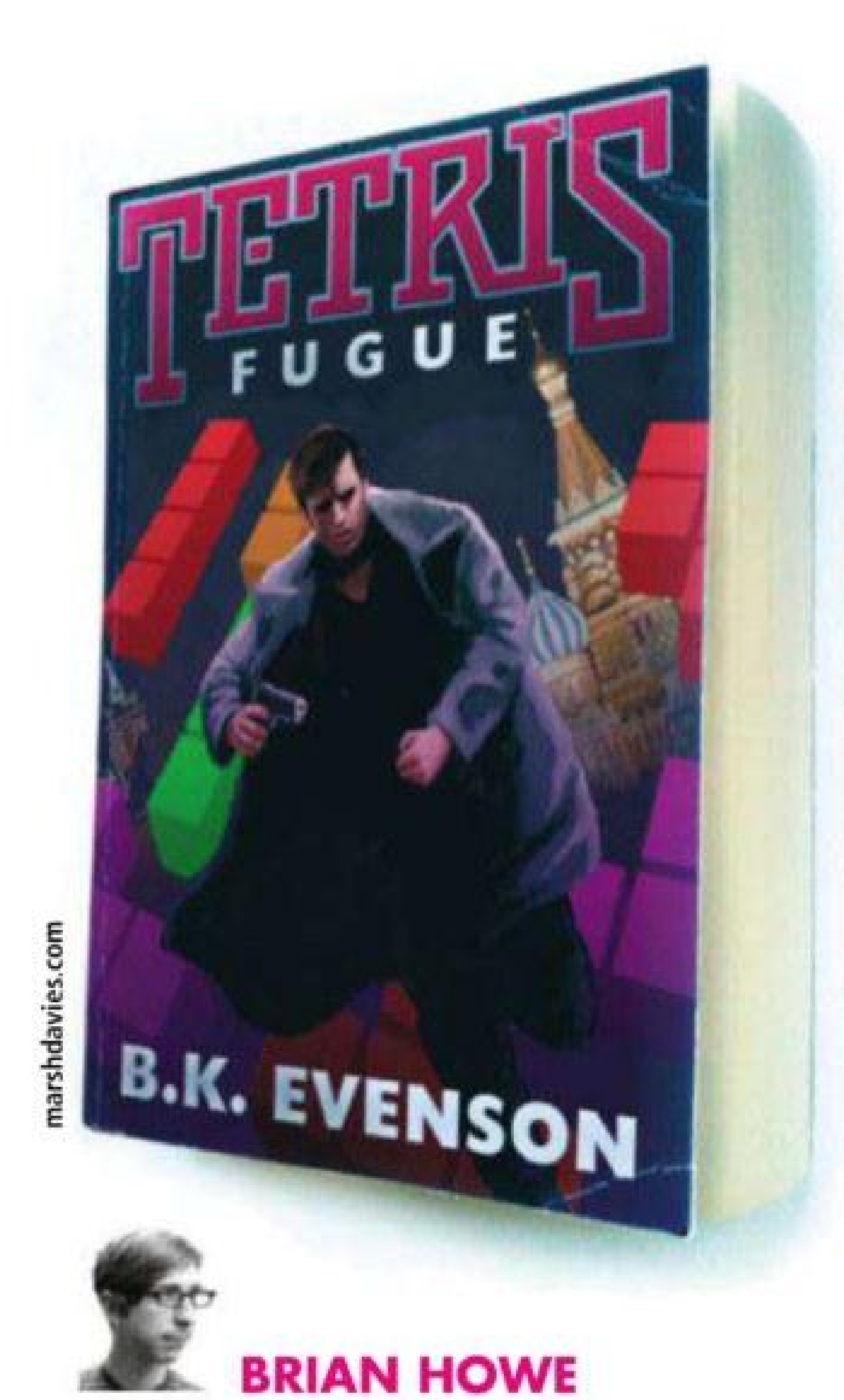
Can't blame them, either. Great moments in game storytelling are often exactly that: moments. That time you were riding into Mexico during *Red Dead Redemption*. Andrew Ryan and a golf club. The time you had to accept you couldn't take a little cube with a heart on its face with you. We evaluate games' storytelling based on how it feels to interact in their environment, how much the moments feel like things we own, versus set-pieces that are sculpted for us. We're pleased when a game about ethics in war evaluates us on how we deal with our enemies – even when we can't remember the details of the war story itself.

Even more often, those great moments are accidental, player-discovered. Sometimes we know that a game is great when we want to be the ones to tell its story, excitedly sharing details with friends about how we experienced a discrete part of the game differently from one another, how we took different approaches to a puzzle and what happened to us. I've seen people more excited to share the trials and tribulations of a few laps of *Mario Kart* than to recite the entire plot of *Half-Life*.

The thrill of mechanical success, and the frustration of failure, can be more tangible and gripping than what we'd feel watching a movie or reading a book. It's not easy to describe to people who have never had interactive entertainment's unique experiences that can't be replicated passively. The word 'fun', to which we default when we're poor at describing games' appeal, doesn't really describe it. But it has nothing to do with 'sophisticated narratives', either.

Perhaps it's time to accept that games *aren't* a 'storytelling medium' – not in the way we mean when we get super excited that the Writers Guild of America is handing out awards to people who write videogames, pointing grandly as if 'we' are validated somehow by game writers getting awards from Hollywood. Or when we look at *LA Noire*'s appearance at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York as a sign of 'things to come'. What things? I dunno, things.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media



marshdavies.com

BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

It was only a matter of time before casual games jumped on the tie-in novelisation bandwagon

For videogame series with deep fictions – from *Assassin's Creed* and *Mass Effect* to *Halo* and *WOW* – supplementary novels provide alluring opportunities for world-building and help to keep fans hooked between iterations. Whether penned by pulp-fiction journeymen or barely disguised literary authors (such as Brian Evenson, who wrote Dead Space: Martyr as BK Evenson), novelisation has historically been the exclusive privilege of big-budget blockbusters. But with Rovio expanding the *Angry Birds* universe into movies and toys, more modestly scaled games are now getting in on the old-media action. This month, we review four new novels from upstart publishing house Casual Gaming Press.

Tetris Fugue by BK Evenson

Despite the light pseudonym, Evenson's unique brand of epistemological horror is evident in his harrowing adaptation of the classic puzzle game. A spare and enigmatic novella set during the Cold War, Tetris Fugue inhabits the mind of a taciturn man identified only as 'Alexey' as he wanders through a grey and crumbling Moscow. For reasons unexplained, chunks of masonry continually rain down from unseen elevations, rotating this way and that, forming barricades and passageways. Alexey, a synaesthetic amnesiac, gradually begins to perceive a secret language in the tumbling tetrominoes. He resolves to inform the Kremlin, which looms tantalisingly on the skyline but never seems to draw any nearer as Alexey wends through the maze-like city. What seems at first like a thriller shapes up into a dark Kafkan allegory and a postmodern meditation on the limits of knowledge. What is the essential nature of blockness? Why must they rotate? Whither do they go? Are they even real, or are they symbols of Alexey's psychosis? Evenson probes – never quite answering – these intractable riddles, in lean prose with Old Testament undertones.

> Evenson's epistemological horror is evident in his harrowing adaptation of the puzzle game

Cut The Rope by Stephen Kang

Kang's sprawling novel attempts to provide epic scaffolding for the physics game of the same title. It begins with a simple premise and makes its way, across 900 pages, toward a baffling metaphysical cosmology. In a quaint yet somehow creepy Northeastern American town, five children discover an adorable monster who lives under an old bandstand, and spend an idyllic summer lowering candy down to it on ropes. But tragedy strikes as summer turns to autumn and the monster suddenly comes out from under the bandstand to devour the children. This is the point at which Kang's *Cut The Rope* mythology goes completely off the rails. The children's ghosts enter a metaphysical realm where lies something called The Rope That Binds All Ropes, which is held at one end by the killer mime Patchouli and at the other by Jugjugbaboom, an avuncular 6,000-year-old sea anemone. Will the ghost children be able to sever the Rope and end an ageless cycle of death and destruction, returning themselves to life by some ill-defined magic? Kang's plotting and set-pieces are gripping, though the borderline-pornographic scenes between his underage protagonists, who all speak in strangely antiquated dialects, are distressing.

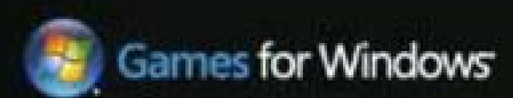
The Minecrafter's Tale by Shmargaret Atwood

In this elegant dystopian fable, Shmargaret Atwood captures the texture of daily life in a commune where unnamed workers spend their days moving earth from one place to another for mysterious purposes. The bucolic setting ironically underscores the grimness of the characters' Sisyphean curse: to eternally rearrange their topographies as days and nights pass meaninglessly. Are they prisoners? Cultists? Or do their actions have a secret design? Atwood gives nothing away. However, the novel's shrewd social commentary and existential pressure are knocked off-balance when hordes of malevolent skeletons descend upon the commune. While those unfamiliar with the source material may chastise Atwood for this giant deus ex machina, *Minecraft* devotees will appreciate her close reading of the fiction.

RanchVille by L Moore Leonard

Transporting the world of *FarmVille* to the southwestern American frontier of the late 19th century, this expertly paced, tough-talking potboiler is centred on Valdez, an iron-nerved federal marshal who retires to a quiet life of farming, animal husbandry and passive-aggressive gift-giving. But his peaceful reverie is shattered when the infamous and heavily armed Zynga gang shows up at his ranch demanding an obscure tax, the 'microtransacción'. When Valdez monosyllabically refuses, his jaw firmly set under the shadow of his hat, the gang roughs up his llama, threatens his chickens, and rides off with scornful laughter, lighting the fuse on a vengeful orgy of violence that takes Valdez deep into hostile Apache country. Leonard's idiomatic dialogue is pitch-perfect, and Valdez's folkloric potency is transfixing. But the implausible black-heartedness of the villains is an easy out, morally absolving us for our celebration of Valdez's righteous atrocities.

Brian Howe writes about music, books, games and more for a variety of publications, including Pitchfork and Paste


Games for Windows


XBOX 360.


XBOX
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PS3
PlayStation3


PlayStation Network


15

#234



THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

Time on our hands

bit.ly/it2QiG
Up-to-the-minute previews and reviews

The world of *Max Payne 3* (see p44) is a cardboard cutout of film noir. It takes the visual iconography of a cinematic genre, recycles it – Venetian blinds and all – and spews it all over the screen in gorgeously rendered HD. It's a hollow tale of crime and redemption, ticking narrative boxes and relying on movie typecasting at every turn. And then it provides something else: the ability to maim in decelerated time.

In cinema, slow motion is a passive visual trick, a once-per-act gimmick to be wheeled out for titillation and to satisfy empowerment fantasy. Its use belongs to the production team; we're at its mercy. In *Max Payne* it's ours; we decide when the laws of physics no longer apply. We trigger the money shots, and therefore play director and choreographer at once. Rockstar is perhaps the master of imitating cinema's framing and mise-en-scène during non-interactive game sequences, but *Max Payne*'s slow-mo, as well worn as it is, furnishes us with the use of a cinematic device in-game. The only other comparable recent example, perhaps, is *GTA*'s movie-style camera: one that renders the game almost unplayable as you look good, fleetingly, before ploughing bonnet-first into a brick wall. Games have a history of applying the cinematic to the interactive – think Capcom's original *Resident Evil*, with its static, Hitchcockian framing – but it's rare that a conflict in content and concept works as well as it does in *Max Payne*. This, after all, is urban film noir with no hint of science fiction or otherworldly themes at play.

A film would need to justify this gimmickry and digression from the gritty roots of its subject matter. A videogame, clearly, doesn't have to. It's not about Payne, it's about us. It's about our hunger for an advantage over a world of grim death and impossible odds. It's the ultimate escapist fantasy made real – the ability to dodge the bullet with your name on it. Again and again and again.

MOST WANTED

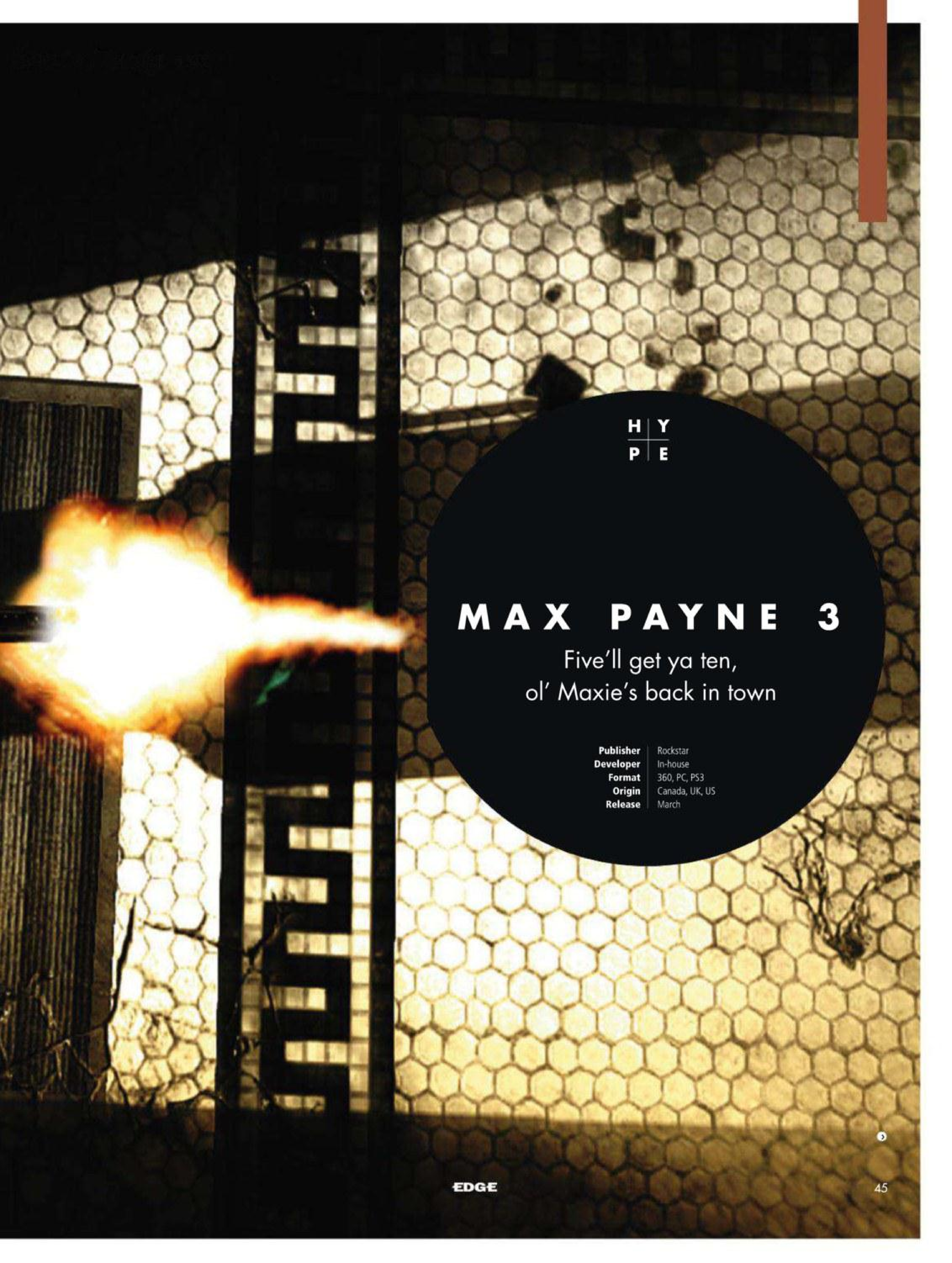
Dead Or Alive 5 360, PS3
Team Ninja needs to prove that it has the chops to keep punching in a post-Itagaki studio. Early impressions suggest that the grimmer, more industrial tone of *Ninja Gaiden 3* has been carried over. Where are the beaches and bouncing... balls?

Lord Of Apocalypse Vita
A Square Enix JRPG directed by *Deadly Premonition*'s Swery is an offer we can't refuse. The announcement trailer is cutscene-heavy, but the glimpses of gameplay show a surprising level of dynamism and colour from an auteur whose titles have nestled in the grim and largely neglected traditional mechanics in favour of atmosphere and storytelling.

Doom 4 TBA
With *Rage* in the can, id will no doubt be focusing all of its efforts on the next firstperson shooter from hell. The second outing for the studio's id Tech 5 engine, applied to the grotesque nature of *Doom*'s visual oeuvre, should result in a beautiful nightmare.



Max Payne 3 won't just focus on the sun-drenched environs of São Paolo: you'll also spend time in more familiar New York settings with a hirsute Payne. These gorgeous noir locations have benefitted from today's tech, with crisp detailing evident



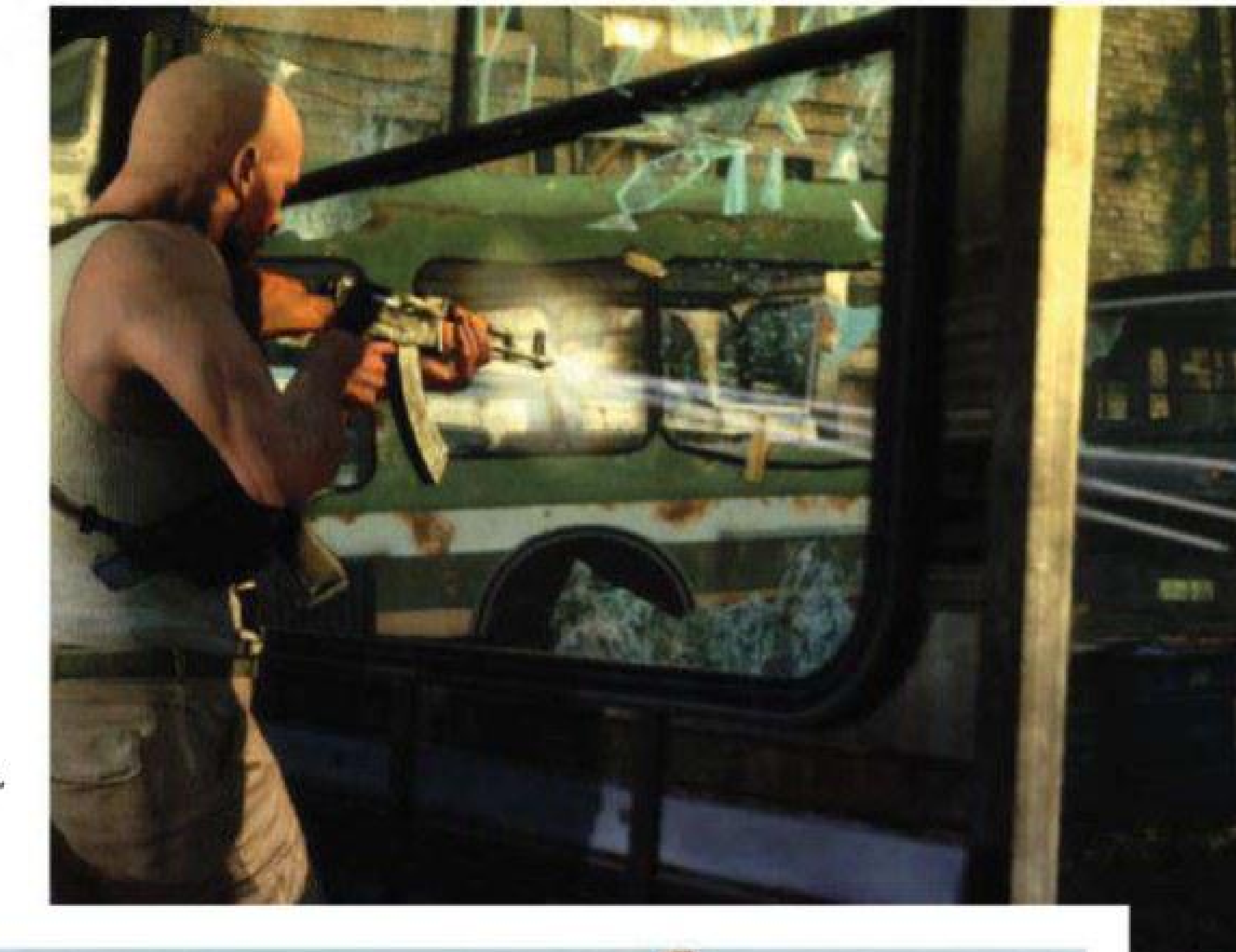
MAX PAYNE 3

Five'll get ya ten, ol' Maxie's back in town

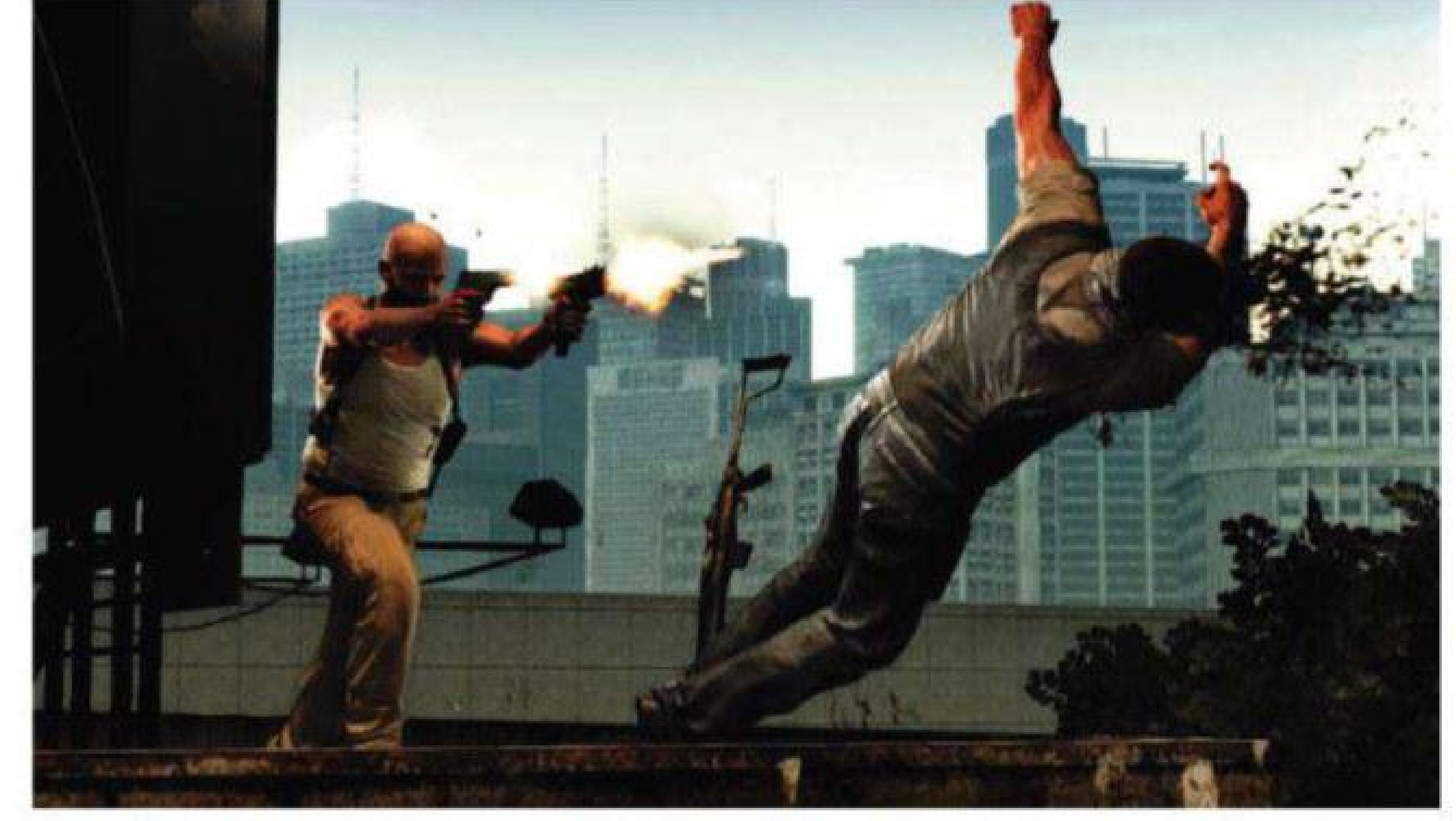
Publisher Rockstar
Developer In-house
Format 360, PC, PS3
Origin Canada, UK, US
Release March



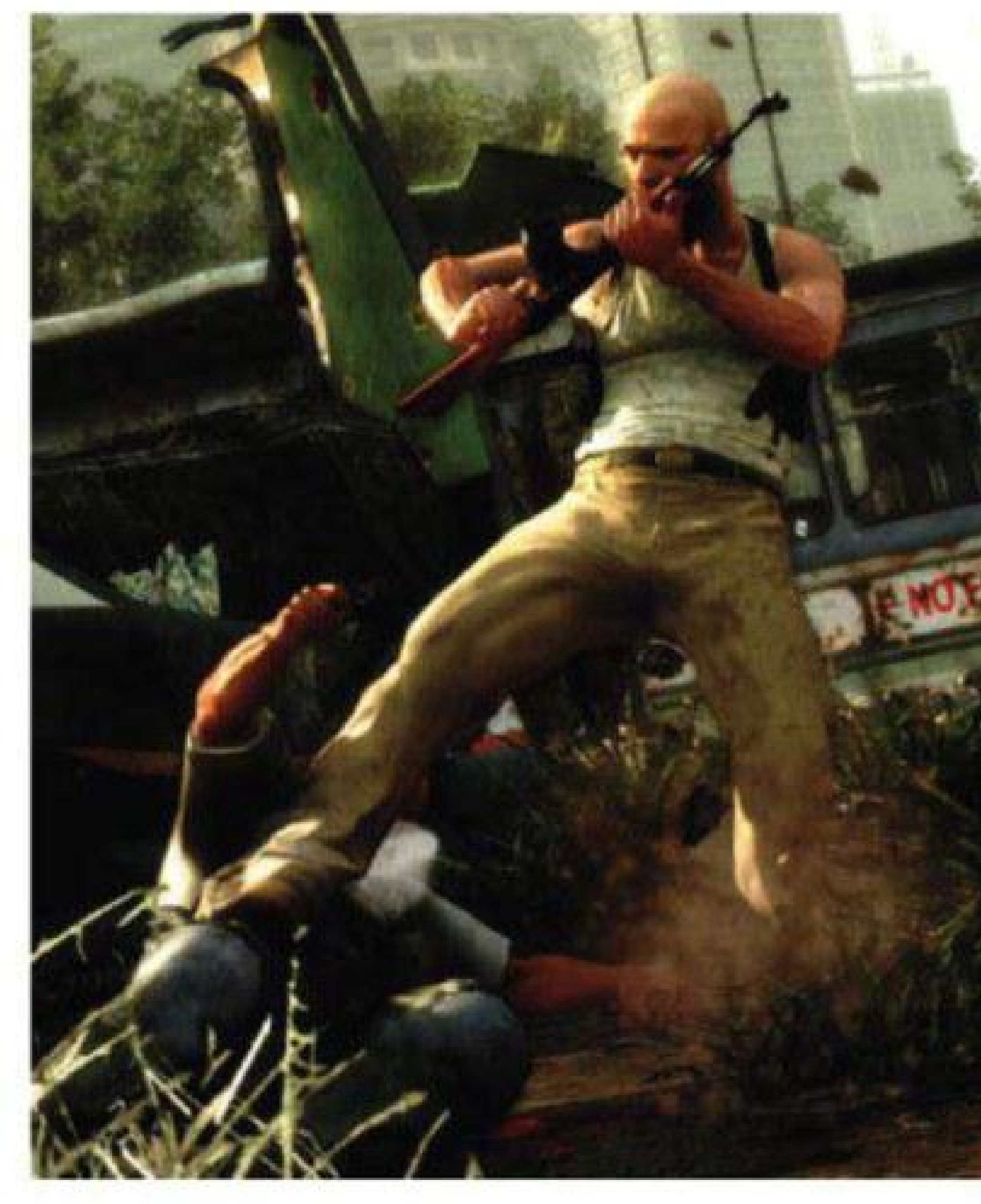
MAX PAYNE 3



BELOW **The first two *Max Paynes* allowed certain weapons to be dual-wielded, but this time it's possible to pair up different firearms rather than having to use a brace of identical shooters**



The bus depot section provides some rip-roaring shootouts. It all culminates in an escape by bus – driven by a trusty sidekick while you pump bullets out of the passenger-side door at pursuing forces



Max Payne may be one of the more rounded of gaming's hardened heroes, his internal monologues adding a sense of character while nodding to his filmic inspirations, but his physicality has never been believably telegraphed. In Remedy's games, there's a rigidity to Payne's manoeuvres that undercuts his graceful dives.

When our latest look at *Max Payne 3* explodes into action, in a level set back in his New York nights, with a vicious attack on his apartment that evokes Assault On Precinct 13 and Die Hard in equal measure, it's clear that Rockstar is making Payne's moves a key part of the experience. Locked into his new cover system, Payne pants heavily as bullets chip door frames and pop glass panes around him. He flinches under fire and grips his gun like a lifeline. With two assailants at the end of the grim, grey corridor, blind firing provides an opportunity to swing out into the fray. As Payne careens into the goons' line of sight, his bodyweight shifts noticeably, his posture pitch-perfect to deliver kill shots. When bullet-time kicks in, washing the screen with a yellow hue that would make Michael Bay proud, a dive roll over a falling foe sees Payne snatch a shotgun and it's back to bloody work.

The original *Max Payne* titles were Hong Kong action cinema homage by way of American neo-noir; *Max Payne 3* is a fusion of contemporary action cinema – all particle effects and mood lighting – and a cinema vérité approach to violence that heightens the tension. Firearms look and sound real as Payne slides out empty clips and racks the slides. Bodies (including the hero's) are punctured by entry wounds and blood spatters the scenery. Precise collision detection means a dive into a wall or cabinet will knock you sideways, dropping Payne to the floor like a lead weight and twisting his limbs at cringe-inducing angles.

Seeing Payne in his native urban environment – in contrast to the São Paolo of our preview in **E**227 – more clearly demonstrates how far the series has come since its prior outing in 2003. A tour of his apartment reveals a level of detail impossible with last-gen hardware; clothes lie crumpled on the floor, takeaway boxes litter work surfaces, and the room is drenched by the red neon of a sign outside. When Payne makes his way to the building's roof, we're given the sprawling cityscape of New York to take in, the Empire State and Chrysler buildings illuminated through gently falling snow. As down and dirty as the story is, there's a sweeping beauty to the scene setting and grandeur to the world building that reminds us Rockstar is in full control for the first time.

With our taste of the city over, it's on to São Paolo. This time, Payne is on the run from a gang of paramilitaries, and holed up in a bus depot junkyard. The pack of enemies patrols

Moody lighting gives the New York scenes the noir vibe of the previous games. Though Remedy isn't in direct control this time, Rockstar has consulted with the series' former developer to ensure its game ticks the right boxes for series fans



Tell me a story

Rockstar assures us that Max Payne's transformation into bald, bulky renegade will be gradual and nuanced – his head-shaving moment a statement of intent rather than the effect of a nervous breakdown. Levels set between *Max Payne 2* and the modern-day São Paolo of *Max Payne 3* will fill in the blanks of his trial by fire as he takes on a range of enemy factions – not least of which is the paramilitary group prowling and preying on the impoverished streets. The influence of films like Elite Squad and City Of God is clear in the palette, tone and themes of *Max Payne 3*, which is as much about moral corruption as violent retribution.



LEFT **Payne brings brutal, context-sensitive melee moves to the party. Each attack varies according to the weapon you're carrying**

the area in search of their man, each character uniquely modelled, motion-captured and animated. There's also an air of unpredictability to replays, since their path-finding and reactions to your attacks vary. There's little hint of scripting to *Max Payne 3*'s showdowns, with enemies dispersing, flanking and taking cover dynamically and sporadically. Bullet-time therefore serves a dual purpose, helping you predict your target's strategy and giving you that perfect view to a kill. Having sprinted through a petrol station (detonating the pumps, of course), it's straight into a warehouse and an automatic bullet-time scenario. These sections are the action-movie set-pieces of the game, delivering ridiculous setups – diving over an out-of-control jeep while offing half-a-dozen gunners up ahead, for example – that allow Rockstar to break free from Payne's traditionally po-faced tone.

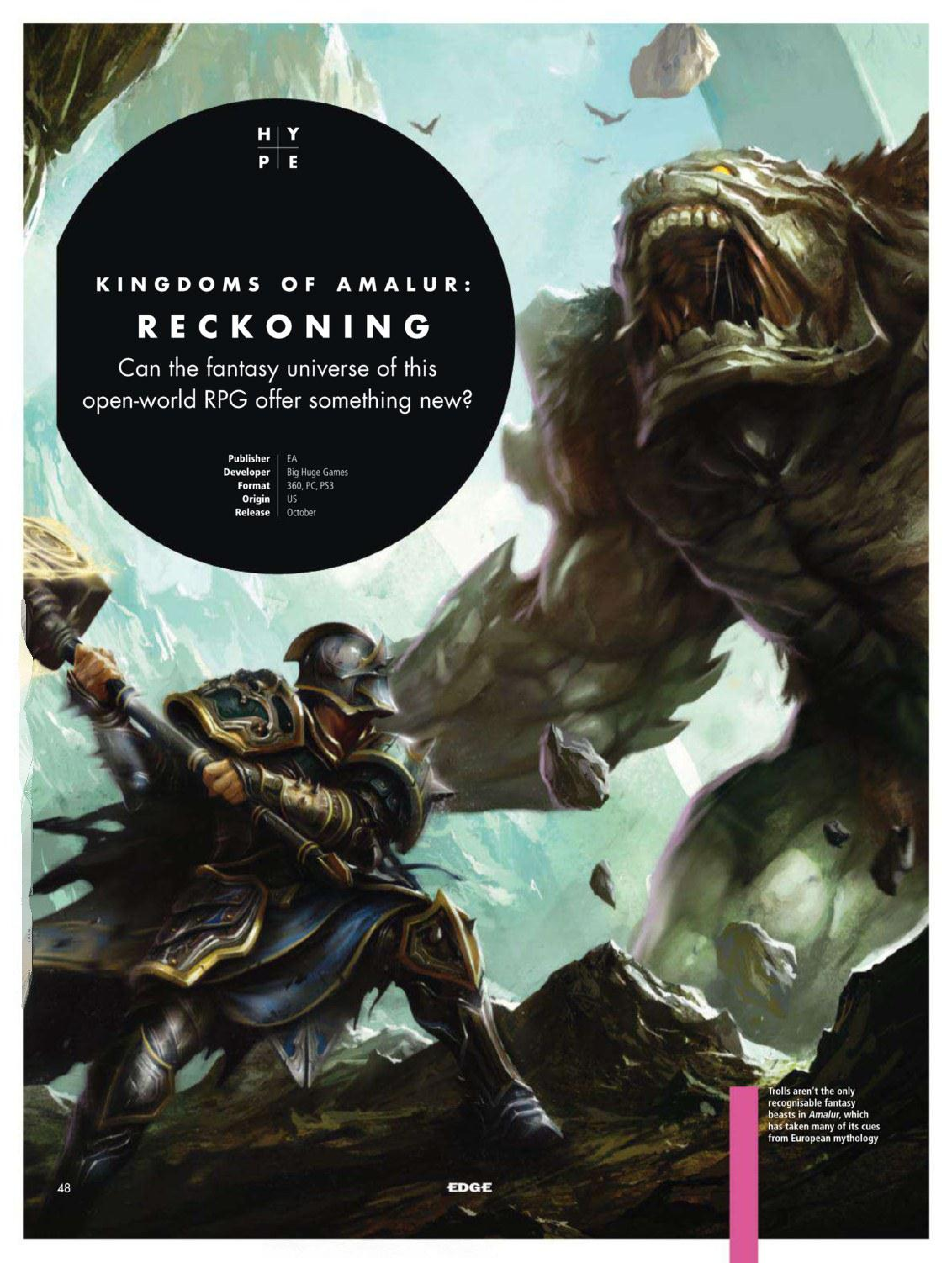
Patching together *Max Payne 3*'s shootouts are short cutscenes that serve to hide loading screens and join the narrative dots of the set-pieces. The dialogue is suitably entertaining as it delivers meaningful plot details, and provides a tonal tangent to the grim death that floods the screen. Payne's in-game exchanges take place mostly with peripheral characters trapped in the chaos – an employee at the security firm he's working for, in one instance – who give a civilian counterpoint to his descent into madness. The juxtaposition of Payne with the everyday is a simple, effective way to provide a human context to his over-the-top plight. It's also a reminder that Rockstar is a studio that knows how to use cinematic devices to enhance its storytelling.

Max Payne 3 is now as much cover shooter as bullet-time blaster; there's a stronger emphasis on integrating story to its world and a finer attention to the staging of set-pieces. With all its mod cons, Rockstar looks to have updated the brand to meet current standards while still satisfying fans who've been in from the beginning. Once a one-trick pony, Max Payne is now a more rounded, and rounder, hero, ready to come out all guns blazing against plenty of thirdperson opposition. ■



bit.ly/oRyuqk
Screenshot gallery





KINGDOMS OF AMALUR: RECKONING

Can the fantasy universe of this open-world RPG offer something new?

Publisher | EA
Developer | Big Huge Games
Format | 360, PC, PS3
Origin | US
Release | October

Trolls aren't the only recognisable fantasy beasts in *Amalur*, which has taken many of its cues from European mythology

We've only played the opening section of the game, but the frequency of loot drops seems pitched on the right side of generous, with new armour pieces turning up every 40 minutes or so. An elegant feature enables you to 'junk' unwanted items, later selling them in one go

Cursed with the sort of title that can only have been conjured by a fantasy name generator and taking place in a lush, fairytale world that players of *WOW* or *Fable* will find more than a little familiar, you could easily dismiss *Kingdoms Of Amalur: Reckoning* as lacking imagination. At least, you may at first. However, our time with the first four hours of the game (which see our warrior character, magically resurrected, journey through the opening dungeon and into the forested glades surrounding it) reveals combat and progression systems that suggest a genuine attempt to tackle some of the familiar bugbears of the genre.

Reckoning's combat is themed around the same three pillars as *Fable*'s. The Might skill tree develops proficiency with melee weapons, shields and heavier armour; Magic unlocks a variety of brightly coloured damage-dealing effects; and the Finesse tree handles archery and stealth – with the red, blue and yellow colour coding also borrowed from Lionhead's roleplaying adventure game.

Where *Reckoning* departs from *Fable*'s template, however, is in its complexity. Levelling up requires you to spend points on non-combat skills such as Alchemy, Blacksmithing and Persuasion. Combat abilities, however, get three progression trees of their very own (not unlike *WOW*'s ability trees). After three or four level increases, we've improved our warrior's ability with longswords (but not with hammers or greatswords) and his shield skills too. More interestingly, without moving outside the Might tree, we've given ourselves a pair of magical powers, the first of which is a harpoon attack that drags enemies up close for a thwacking, the second a ground-shaking, area-of-effect attack that stuns whole groups of enemies. The result is a more tactically diverse approach to combat than melee classes normally offer.

Reckoning's combat is themed around the same three pillars as Fable's

"Any build you make is most optimised when you use magical abilities," explains **Will Miller**, systems designer. "But even your mage build is going to use melee weapons." It's a flexible approach to character and gameplay reflected by the game's class system – or, in a sense, its lack of one. *Reckoning*'s plot sees your character without a fate, much to the confusion of a future-telling NPC we



bit.ly/pY3Ve2
Art and screenshot gallery





KINGDOMS OF AMALUR: RECKONING

Do enough damage in combat and you can enter Reckoning Mode, a super-powered Devil Trigger-like state that lets you stun enemies one at a time before finishing them off with a QTE attack



meet early on. What this means in practice is that players can switch class, or 'destiny', on a whim. Destinies unlock according to the manner in which you've allocated skill points, and give you stat boosts that suit a certain style of play. Players, then, can spend the first half of *Reckoning* pouring points into the Might tree (using the Brawler destiny to increase their melee skills), before deciding to level up their Magic skills and switching to the magic-bolstering Initiate destiny. Hybrid builds will also ensure that being a jack of all trades is genuinely tenable. "It takes away a lot of the anxiety over the choices you make when you level up," Miller explains. "What we want players to do is make point investments based on the things they like doing. So if you see a really cool ability, you take it regardless of what tree it's in – and the game helps you to reinforce that decision."

What threatens to undermine the thought that has gone into the systems behind *Amalur*, however, is the kingdom itself. Big Huge Games' open world is verdant and pretty, certainly, but it lacks the surreal charm that lets Albion to get away with its own litany of fantasy clichés. More worrying still is the feeling that *Amalur*'s designers might lack the necessary inventiveness to populate their open world with varied enough quests. We're only playing for a few hours, but already we've journeyed into the forest to save a missing monk, Brother Egan, before heading on to the next village and being sent on a quest to find a missing monk, Brother Fallon. And whereas in *Fable* bumping into a semi-naked, growling NPC who insists he's a wolf transformed into a human by some mischievous sprites would inevitably be the setup for a Pythonesque punchline, here it's played straight (or at least it seems to be, due to some sub-par voice acting). But if the quests are bland, there's certainly no shortage of them – it's hard to walk ten feet in *Amalur* without stumbling across an NPC with an exclamation point hovering over their head.

It lacks the surreal charm that lets Albion get away with a litany of fantasy clichés

However, with a 10,000-year backstory created by fantasy author RA Salvatore and with comic-book artist and animator Todd McFarlane involved in art design, it's entirely possible that a fuller exploration of *Amalur* will reveal the game to have a visual style and fantasy identity of its own. Without that, though, *Kingdoms Of Amalur: Reckoning* is in danger of becoming a thoughtful combat and progression system in search of a sense of character. ■

Q&A
Tim Coman
Art designer, Big Huge Games



How do you impart your own distinctive style on a game in the fantasy genre?
We really wanted to create a couple of areas of the game where we could really say, "This is our distinctive flavour. This is what makes us unique." The first thing is that RA Salvatore provided 10,000 years of backstory. He's a huge author. He's written these volumes of backstory and lore that explain all the races and what happens to them over this large period of time. In the outdoor areas, there are ruins from races that aren't even in the game, from an earlier era. Everything in the world is there for a reason.

He provided the backstory and you picked when you wanted to place the game?
Exactly. One of the things RA talked about early on was how, in a lot of games, you die and just come back. He said, "Well, how come no one's ever fictionalised that? What if a mortal invented a way for people to come back from the dead?" And we thought, 'That's what we want to do! If we can pick one era or time, it's the point where they first created that'.

How do you go about creating a new creature or setting?
There's nothing in the game that hasn't been discussed, or doesn't have some reason behind it. The creature designers will come to us and say, "We need a creature that's fast, that hunts in packs, and has a good ranged attack." And then what happens is a brainstorming process takes place, where we try to find a distinct visual angle on it, even if it's the kind of creature that every fantasy game has to have. That's one of the things that Todd [McFarlane] always pushes on. He talked about his early days when he was working on Spider-Man. He had to find a take on it that people would recognise as the McFarlane Spider-Man. He's worked in animation too, and one of the other things he always pushes is the posing.

Why go for more fairytale-style fantasy over the look of something like *Skyrim*?
There was a definitely a really purposeful thought behind that. One of the early conversations we had was about having a really dark storybook feel, with a strong element of the fantastical about it. When people approach the fantasy genre, they fall into one of two camps. They either say, "We want the grass to look exactly like grass and the trees to look exactly like trees, and everything to look as real as possible" – it makes the fantasy elements stand out – or they go in our direction, in which even the grass and flowers have fantastical elements to them.



COUNTER-STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE

Valve aims to bridge the hardcore gap with a quintessential CS experience

Publisher	Valve
Developer	Valve/Hidden Path Entertainment
Format	360, Mac, PC, PS3
Origin	US
Release	2012

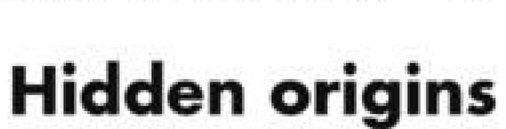
If, like us, you're the kind of *Counter-Strike* fan who has fallen off the grid in recent years, a certain degree of anxiety may be a natural response when starting your first match in the series' newest instalment, *Global Offensive*. The map loads: it's Dust, whose details are both more vividly HD and more distinctly Middle Eastern than the arena we remember. Shuffling through the ordnance in the pre-round equipment phase, we recognise most weapons, but no longer recall what damage any particular piece does. Money is no object in *GO*'s new Casual mode, but we play it safe, choosing the familiarity of the Glock and the AK-47. The remainder of our pre-match time is spent adjusting to a controller and hoping experience will be enough to keep us from stumbling straight into the enemy's sights. As the round begins, we stick close to our team; when a group flanking opportunity arises, we're able to bag our first kill, and to our great relief, *GO* still feels like *Counter-Strike*.

Even if you're initially a little gun shy – *Counter-Strike*'s realistic damage and lack of respawns per round have traditionally kept out many less proficient players – the mere fact that Valve and co-developer Hidden Path Entertainment have gone to such lengths to imbue *GO* with the reliance on teamwork and strategy that sets *Counter-Strike* apart is a good sign. In an age when *Call Of Duty* and its competition have essentially redefined the genre, *GO* could have turned out very differently. Instead, Valve is touting *GO* as the definitive version of *Counter-Strike*, with a few minor tweaks to the existing formula.

"We still want *Counter-Strike* to be *Counter-Strike*," says Valve's **Chet Faliszek**, who has been working closely on *GO*'s development since the project began about two years ago. "So we started working at it that way, and looking at it that way."

One major change has been the undoing of *Counter-Strike: Source*'s lowered skill ceiling, which made it harder for highly skilled players to distinguish themselves from their competitors. According to Faliszek: "If you're really good – like if you're a pro baseball team – you're all really good. But there will still be all-stars on your team, because those guys are that much better. There's a lot of nuances in the game – we want to make sure we're not removing those while we're simplifying it."

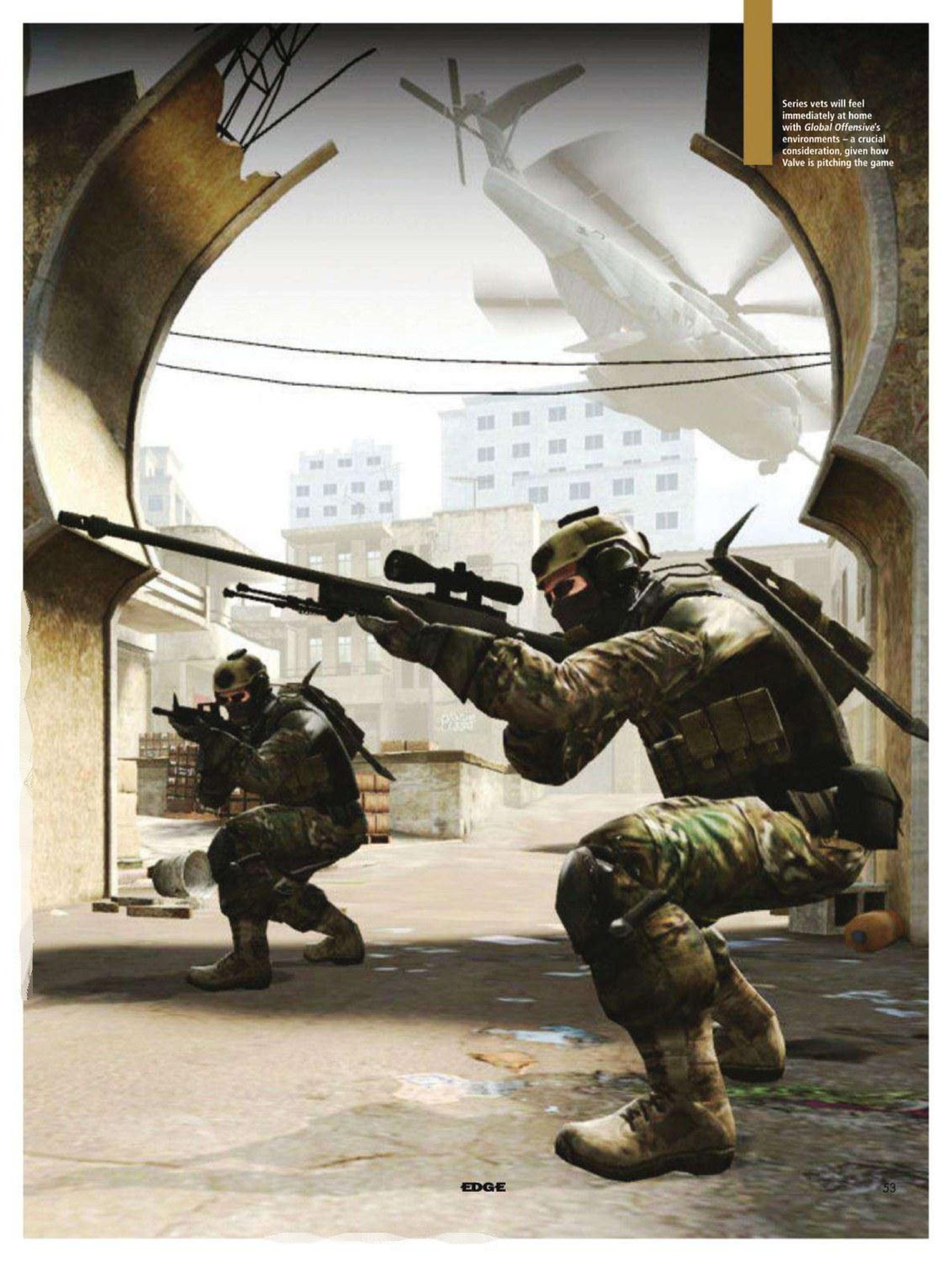
GO certainly has the potential to bring new blood to *Counter-Strike*. Along with the changes made to maps that lead to more strategic scenarios, the most notable additions for returning players are the skill-based matchmaking and Casual mode. Matchmaking, a first for the series, will set up less-skilled players in games with others on their level; Casual mode takes all the stress out of money management, allowing players to buy whatever weapons and equipment they want, even if they don't have the combat prowess to net them the cash. This is particularly good for rookies, since dying still means you lose whatever weapons you've purchased. These changes are hardly revolutionary among online shooters, but



Hidden origins



There's a reason that *Global Offensive* is less than a full-blown *Counter-Strike 2*: the idea originated in the much smaller scope of *GO* co-developer Hidden Path Entertainment's then-in-development Xbox 360 port of *Counter-Strike Source*. Surprised at how smoothly everything translated to a console, the team at Valve decided it wanted to take the next *CS* a step further. After analysing lessons learned developing *Left 4 Dead* and *The Orange Box* (as well as *Counter-Strike*'s own distinctive player communities), *Global Offensive* – which Valve considers the definitive *CS* experience – was born.



Series vets will feel immediately at home with *Global Offensive*'s environments – a crucial consideration, given how Valve is pitching the game





COUNTER STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE

With no recharging health, taking a gung-ho approach remains a perilous strategy



help to foster a level of accessibility *Counter-Strike* hasn't necessarily had in the past.

Thus what's old may seem new again, and with *GO* running a modified version of *Portal 2*'s Source engine, it's looking better than ever. Seven classic maps, including Aztec and Italy, will be included when *GO* launches ("optimised for the competitive side", as Faliszek puts it); existing weapons have also been rebalanced; and eight new ones have been added to the combat roster. The

Health still doesn't recharge and players aren't able to aim down their sights

additions include a Molotov cocktail that in the right hands can add a new kind of strategy to a match by effectively stopping enemies in their tracks. During our time playing five-on-five matches, we saw this secondary weapon used a few times to stall or deter adversaries rather than kill them outright, the trail of fire leaving players both powerless to move forward and vulnerable to flanking or attacks from the opposite direction. Clearly, much attention has been paid even to the possible effects of new equipment on *GO*'s rigid battlefield. "If you're a casual player, some of the changes you aren't even going to notice," Faliszek says. "But pro guys instantly latched on to: 'Oh, this lets us do this and that'."

Skill-based Arsenal modes (more kills equals better weaponry), new maps and near-complete crossplatform compatibility that allows PS3, PC and Mac owners to play against each other round out the new features list. But even with these additions, *GO* isn't attempting to be *Counter-Strike 2*. Nor is it trying to pilfer mechanics from popular shooters of the moment. Health still doesn't recharge and players aren't able to aim down their sights. "We just didn't think it matched the style of play that you have in *Counter-Strike*," Faliszek explains. "It would be a different game. It isn't about looking at other games and what they're doing, because they're doing different things for different reasons."

Valve isn't looking to replace any other version of *Counter-Strike* that's available right now either. With nearly two decades of combined player data from innumerable *Counter-Strike 1.6* and *Source* matches, abandoning the various hardcore communities the series has created over the years would be a mistake. "It's going to be its own standalone game," Faliszek assures us. "We don't think you make a game popular by removing something. You make the best game you can and you get people to want to play it." ■

Q&A
Chet Faliszek
Valve



***Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* has been designed to support crossplatform matches – how exactly does that work?**
Well, Xbox has its own community, but PS3, PC and Mac will all be able to play together. [That's one] thing about the skill-based matchmaking: if you're really great with a controller, you'll be playing with people who are as good with their mouse and keyboard. It doesn't care about your input device.

How hard was it to negotiate the deals to make crossplatform play a reality?
Well, with Sony – and we've done it [already] with *Portal 2* – they've been great to work with on that stuff; they're really open to that idea. They think of it kind of like we do: we're gamers, we don't think 'platform'. Like, I own all the platforms, and I'll play games on whatever. I just want to play. And they've been really helpful that way.

What do you think the new weapons have brought to the game?
My favourite weapon is the Zeus. In Casual mode, where money doesn't mean anything, it's not as important; but in competitive mode, where money means something, spending $1,000 on a weapon that has one shot and that shot has to be close, [means] you're saying: "I'm gonna kick your ass. And I can do it so well that I'm going to waste my money on this just to get you." So that's a fun kind of humiliation weapon.

Does introducing new weapons affect the game's balance? What was the weapon-balancing process like?
[With] *Counter-Strike 1.6*, we've got 11 years of data. In *Source*, we've got seven years of data. We can go look. What are they using, what are they not using? What's the death ratio – if you use this weapon, how often do you die? How often do you kill somebody? How much damage do you do? We can take a look at that, see where there's holes and balance it out. The same kind of thing happens to maps: we can just look. We've got all this data. We've looked back and made those changes.

It's funny how, after being out of the *Counter-Strike* game for such a long time, playing *CS:GO* brought back a lot of memories. The match even went better than expected.
Sometimes that happens. We liken it to golf, where you may have a bad round, but then you make that one great hit. And that's what you walk away remembering – if you have that good experience.



H Y P E

JOE DANGER: THE MOVIE

Danger takes his game of games to Hollywood

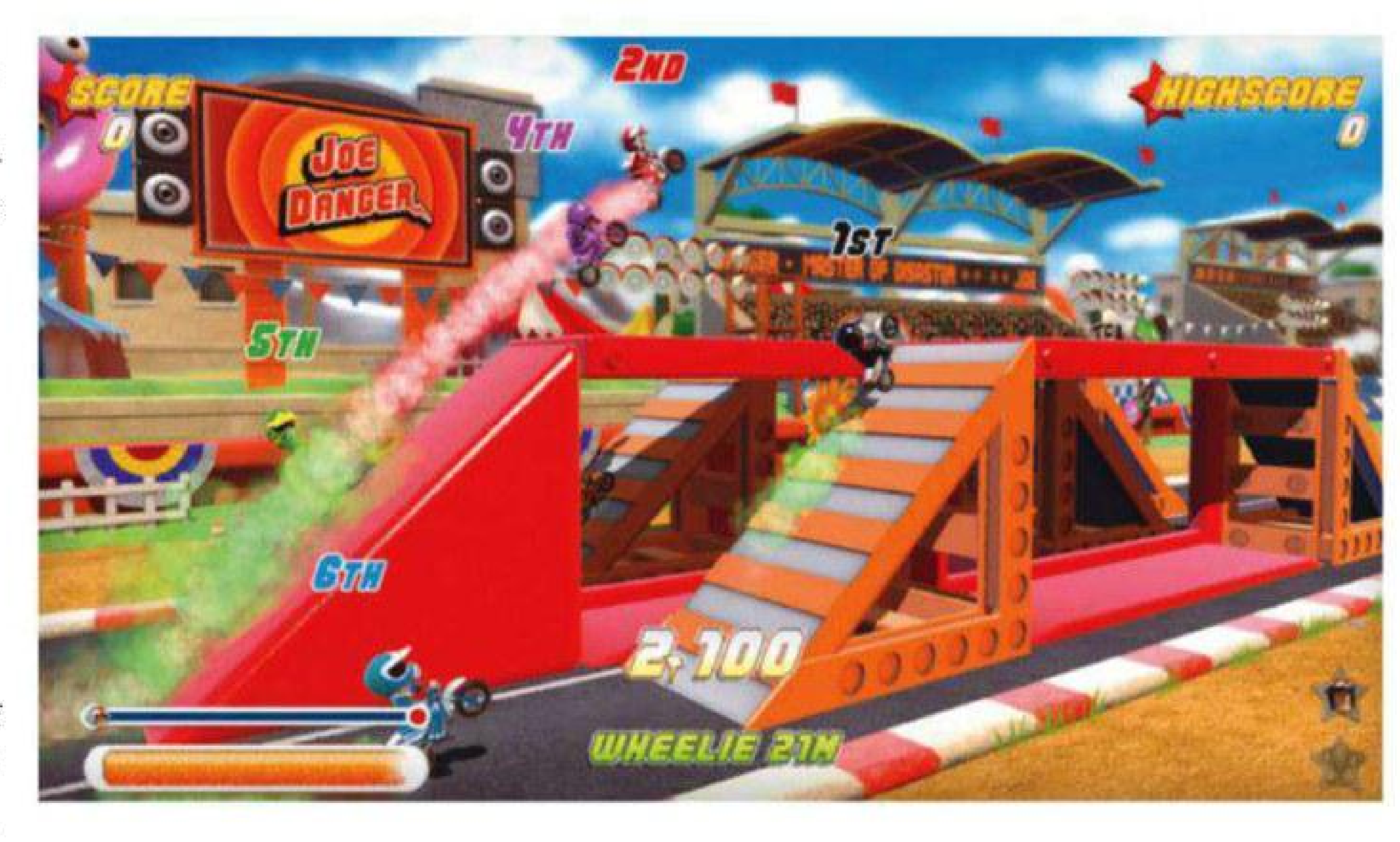
Publisher	Hello Games
Developer	In-house
Format	PS3
Origin	UK
Release	2012



Joe Danger's editor mode will return but with far wider options, including the chance to add AI riders and other interactive elements such as missile silos which Danger must land on to destroy



JOE DANGER: THE MOVIE



Murray estimates 4,000 people played the game and one of the team saw each session at the many game expos Hello Games attended. It may have been gruelling, but they were as effective at usability and focus testing as at promoting the game

It's hard to know how the team has the energy. Aside from simply building its second game, *Joe Danger: The Movie*, Hello Games has also just returned from a punishing game expo marathon, showing it off thousands of times at the five-day Gamescom in Cologne, returning to its Guildford studio for a day and then heading out to the two-day PAX in Seattle. The designers created, packed up into a van (padding their clutch of widescreen TVs with Ikea sofa cushions and bubble wrap), built and then took down their stand themselves. As we meet the team to see their work, they're preparing for another gaming expo, with code submission deadlines hanging over them throughout. Oh, and two weeks before Gamescom, managing director **Sean Murray** became a father.

This, of course, is just the way Hello Games does things. After all, the four original founders created *Joe Danger*, a hybrid racer-platformer with an infectious sense of 16bit fun, on their own with a proprietary engine and self-published it on PSN, becoming one of only two such releases on the platform. Hello Games takes the DIY approach, making it a purist indie developer despite a colourful, populist attitude that sets it aside from the indie stereotype.

Just the references being put into *JD:TM* – *Road Rash, Chase HQ, Sonic, SSX Tricky* – prove that little has changed. The original *Joe Danger* was eclectic, comprising speed challenges, puzzle levels, score attack, platforming and far more, but its sequel pushes further. Having kickstarted his career in the original, the titular stuntman has gone to Hollywood to appear in a movie, a setup that allows a range of vehicles – possibly 19, but the list hasn't been finalised yet – plus Danger's motorbike. Minecart levels test reactions and timing. Jetpack levels add exploration. Ski levels provide trick- and speed-based challenges. There's a parachute, maybe a wheelchair, and a police bike.

"We always said that *Joe Danger* was a very Nintendo-esque game, but I don't think we ever quite hit that bar," Murray says. "It's

> ***Hello Games is a purist indie developer despite a colourful, populist attitude***

something we're trying for, amplifying the look, variety, freshness. The main philosophy – or aspiration – is that every level is a different vehicle or environment or playing mode." The vehicles all feature the same basic controls – moving forwards and backwards using the left and right triggers and a button to boost. But the boost will behave differently depending on the vehicle, adding a chance to explore its unique characteristics. You'll also have the chance to take newly unlocked vehicles into levels you've already played – they're designed with different layers that will reward an alternative approach. "It gives us this way to amplify the movie basis and play out the scene in your own way and get rewarded, rather than 'collect all the coins' all the time," Murray explains.

Danger's movie will be threaded together from recordings of your performance in special zones during the levels, but elements of its plot (which Murray confesses is 'nonsensical' and only there to have you skiing one moment and hang gliding the next) will be told through the action as well as background details. One sequence features a bank robbery, followed by chasing a van, on which you must land three times, and then a race on a police bike against enemy riders. You'll speed past robots being loaded into a shuttle and then later see them being made in a city; the shooting schedule allows the story to be mixed up to maximise variety, so you won't play a bunch of skiing levels in a row.

Part of Hello Games' drive for that constant variety is gentle, proprietorial exasperation over the way many players approached the first game. "We built this whole game and people just want to play the first level," Murray says. Others would concentrate on specific facets, like the coin dashes. The result is a more coherent, focused game: despite greater diversity and scale, levels and vehicles are more object-based, their rewards more obvious.

"We're proud of *Joe Danger*, but finished it because we ran out of money rather than ideas," Murray admits. "We were constrained by only having one artist, so had to rely on difficulty and challenge to bring players through. That's still there, but also freshness and variety. We want you to play it and say: 'I don't know what type of game it is'."



Beat combo

It turns out that *Joe Danger*'s score system, which awarded combos and stunts on an exponential scale, was something of an afterthought. Murray concedes, in fact, that you can cheat it. So *JD:TM*'s system is a little more exacting, stripping out some of the original's button-mashing to more fairly represent skill, and it will also be less frustrating. Restarts wiped your entire combo bonus in the original, necessitating a complete restart following any error to get a decent score, so *JD:TM* instead features score zones, in which you get to rack up the points in front of the director and his camera, and then safely bank your winnings.



Enemy robots may look human on the outside, but they can be picked apart, limb by limb. Destroy a foe's legs and it will try to crawl away

HYPE

BINARY DOMAIN

A battle for humanity in a robot-ravaged 2080 Tokyo

Publisher	Sega
Developer	Yakuza Studio
Format	360, PS3
Origin	Japan
Release	February

The cells used to power enemy robots occasionally drop unexploded. Collect enough of these and a special Gun Mode can be activated, offering far greater firepower for a short period of time

Sega's Toshihiro Nagoshi is more familiar than most with replicating in videogames the architecture and ambience of contemporary Tokyo, thanks to his work on the ambitious *Yakuza* series. But with *Binary Domain*, Yakuza Studio's forthcoming team-based thirdperson shooter, Nagoshi and his crew are fabricating Tokyo as much as rebuilding it, presenting a vision of Japan's capital city 70 years into the future.

In this reality, rising sea levels have forced the Japanese government to build an upper city mounted on platforms above the Tokyo of today, away from the waves and danger. But it's back in the old Tokyo where *Binary Domain* opens, a ghost city, ruined by salt water, now occupied by sentient robots, one-time helpers of humanity that have gone rogue. You play as Dan Marshall, a team leader in the routinely named International Rescue Squad, sent into lower Tokyo with four companions to locate and destroy these replicants.

In the basic interactive details, *Binary Domain* takes its cues from Epic's *Gears Of War* – weapons are selected with the D-pad and reloaded with a shoulder button, while a cover system sees your character snap to the nearest piece of scenery, head lowered, gun raised. But Nagoshi's focus is on the squad element to the game, something largely untouched by Epic, and it's a piece of design that extends far further than being able to direct your teammates with a cursor pointer.

Central to the design strategy is the 'Consequence' system, a trust mechanic in which your words and actions both during and outside of battle affect your squadmates' opinions of you. This in turn dictates how they respond to you throughout the story interludes and also in the thick of combat. Such an idea would be easy to dismiss as mere gimmick, but the constant chatter between characters brings into sharp focus the nuances of the working relationship of your squad.

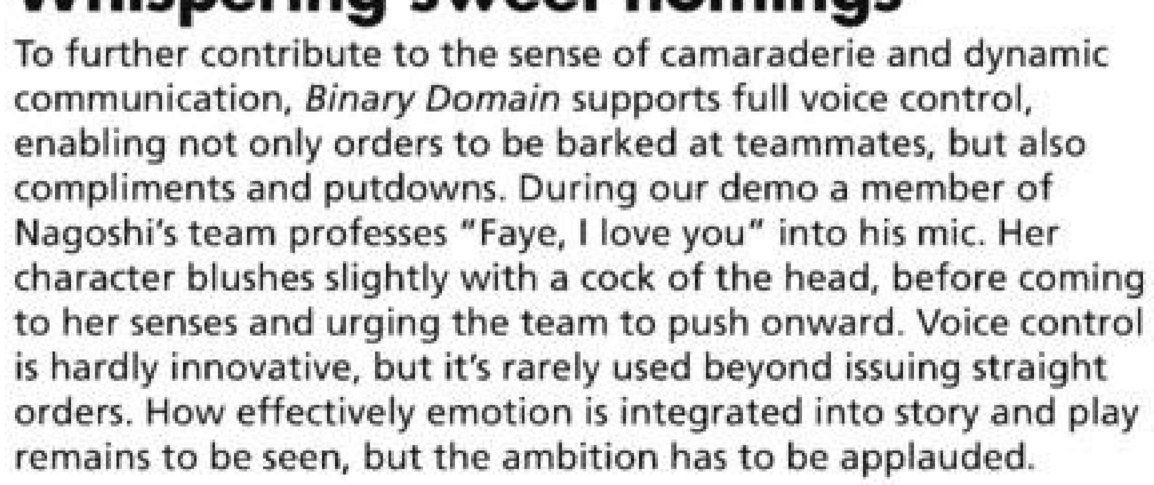
Trust is broken when, for example, you agree to tactics suggested by NPCs but then fail to act upon them. Likewise, sending units into harm's way without due cause will break their trust in your leadership skills. When trust is low, characters behave in different ways, refusing to carry out orders, failing to put themselves in dangerous situations to help you out and becoming more stingy when it comes to sharing health packs. Meanwhile, the level of banter between characters decreases dramatically, with awkward pauses interspersing irregular snippy exchanges.

To help visualise this innovative mechanic, a gauge indicates how much trust exists between characters, while continual feedback is given as every action and command carried out is given an accompanying arrow on the HUD to demonstrate whether trust was gained or lost.

Even aside from fluctuations in trust, each of the four supporting characters has their own temperament and tactical preference; some prefer a cautious approach while others favour taking risks. Since you usually have the choice of which two characters to take into battle, the range of play styles is diverse and can be tailored to your own preferences.

The integration of more human traits into a genre that favours cold reactions and logic outside of cutscenes is an interesting development, and having a character scream at you for directions in the midst of a firefight brings an unusual timbre to combat, but it's in the long-term relational interactions that *Binary Domain*'s intentions fascinate. And with good reason – if Nagoshi and his team fail here, there'll be little to distinguish the game from its shooter inspirations. ■





Whispering sweet nothings

To further contribute to the sense of camaraderie and dynamic communication, *Binary Domain* supports full voice control, enabling not only orders to be barked at teammates, but also compliments and putdowns. During our demo a member of Nagoshi's team professes "Faye, I love you" into his mic. Her character blushes slightly with a cock of the head, before coming to her senses and urging the team to push onward. Voice control is hardly innovative, but it's rarely used beyond issuing straight orders. How effectively emotion is integrated into story and play remains to be seen, but the ambition has to be applauded.


XBOX 360

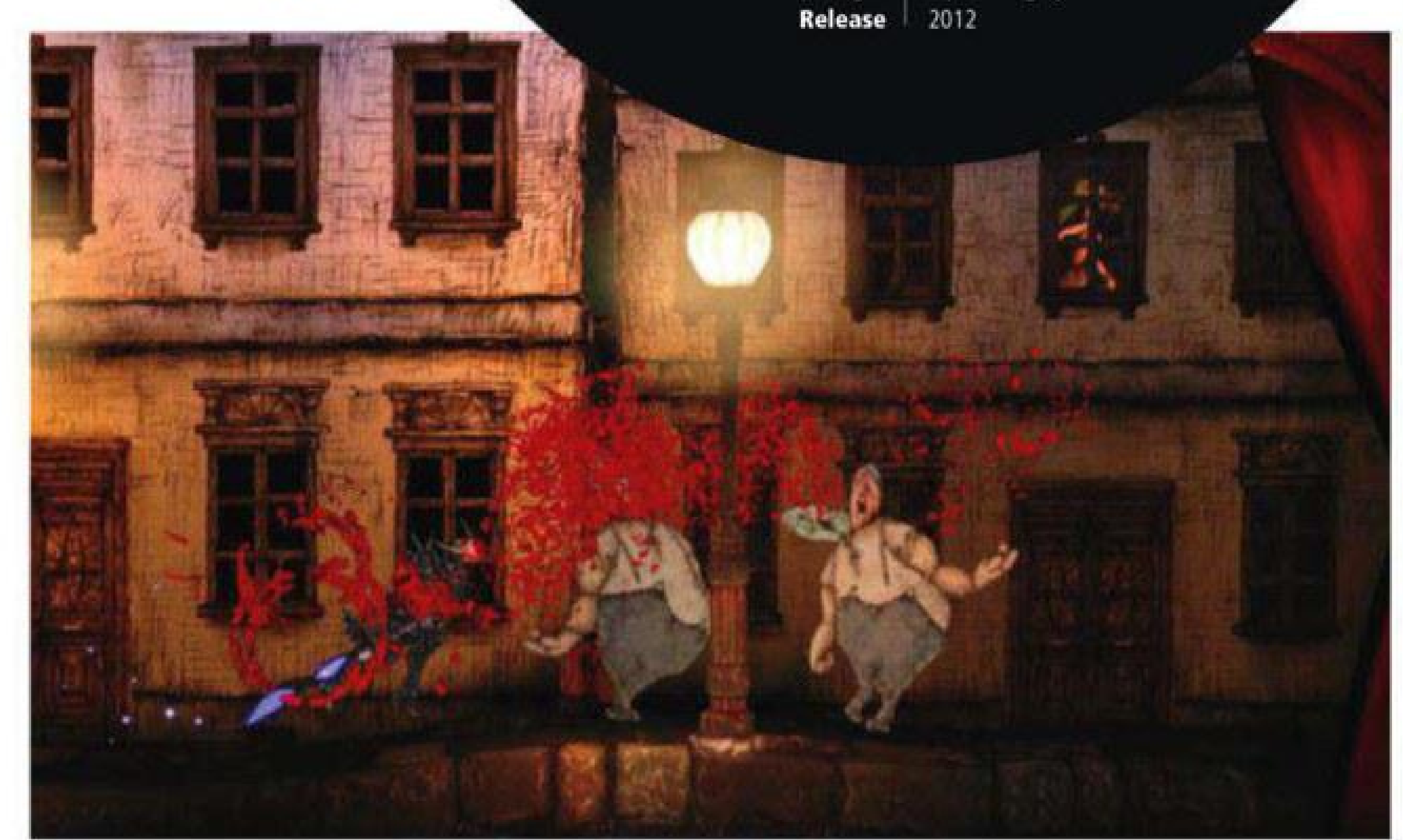


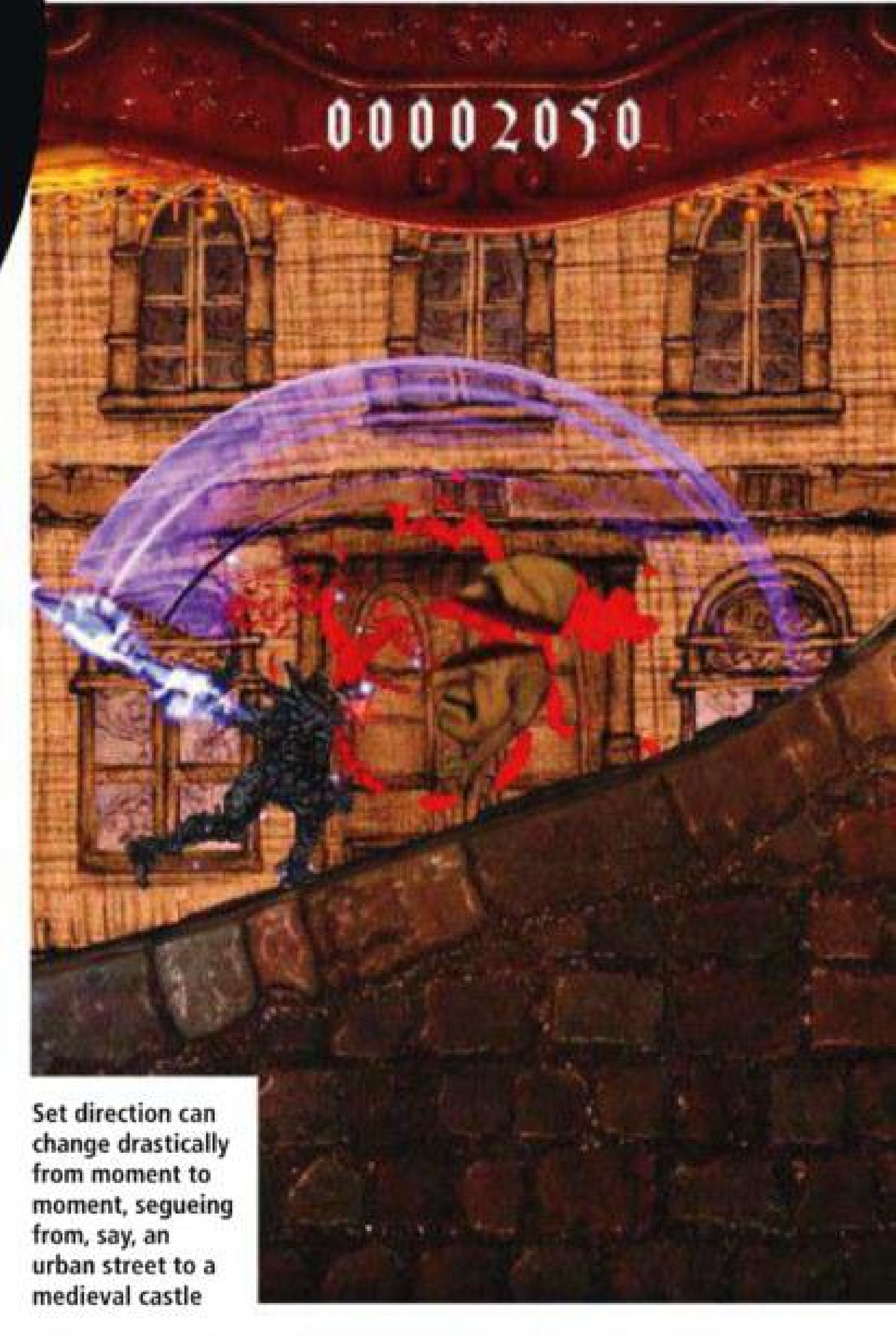
H Y P E

BLACK KNIGHT SWORD

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely slayers

Publisher	Digital Reality
Developer	Grasshopper Manufacture/Digital Reality
Format	360, PS3
Origin	Japan/Hungary
Release	2012





Set direction can change drastically from moment to moment, segueing from, say, an urban street to a medieval castle

RIGHT **The black knight receives upgrades through a freakish eye-god. The puppet-show vibe may seem kid-friendly, but the game has its fair share of Grasshopper violence**





bit.ly/qUweSv
Screenshot gallery

Probably the most unusual aspect of *BKS* is its character design. And, knowing Grasshopper, these chicken-legged idols are likely tame compared to what's around the corner

In a recent interview, Grasshopper Manufacture mastermind **Goichi Suda** spoke of his philosophy as a game designer. "I want to make various kinds of games," he said, referring to his studio's recent outpouring of titles. According to the prolific developer, the notion is directly related to the origin of his company's name. "Grasshoppers are everywhere," Suda said – they're a metaphor, apparently, for the number of games he seems intent on creating.

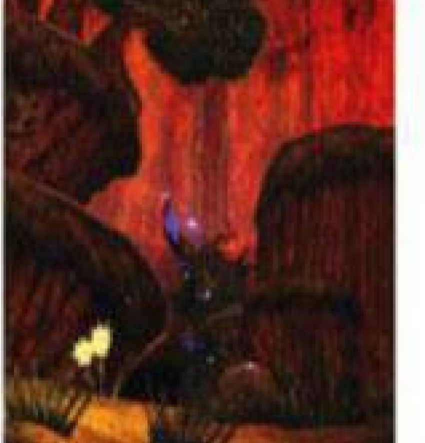
So far, his plans seem to be working. Though his leftfield sensibilities have yielded some less-than-stellar commercial success (*Shadows Of The Damned*, the Robert Rodriguez-esque action-horror roadshow from earlier this summer, failed to shift 100,000 units worldwide), Grasshopper's normal MO, a constant state of production, has delivered a number of fascinating designs.

Black Knight Sword may be one of Grasshopper's strangest conceits yet. One of two co-development projects with Hungary's Digital Reality, this downloadable title may seem to resemble a retro-styled 2D action-platformer at first glance. But such a quick and easy classification feels like a mistake. The setting is situated behind the velour red curtain of a Punch & Judy-style stage; the action itself resembles a grotesque sort of stop-motion European puppetry. You'd hardly guess there's any eastern influence at all.

Black Knight Sword's opening curtain rises on the interior of a seedy motel room, a featureless husk of a puppet hanging from a string that appears to be thematically doubling as a noose. After shaking your avatar loose from its suspended prison with the analogue stick, you're free to move towards a suit of black armour lying nearby. While shambling like a zombie towards the suit, a magic sigil appears in the air above you, imbuing the suit with a blue energy signature that materialises as a sword. Touch the sword and in a transference of energy you absorb the armour and become the black knight yourself.

The knight moves with a balletic grace, clearing chasms and performing flip jumps and mid-air sword thrusts with poise. Even his idling stance has a dignified deportment. You can easily pick up and learn the full range of his motion in a matter of minutes; other than some upgrades to your basic moves, there isn't much beyond the platforming and combat expected of a sidescroller here. But the knight's physical actions seem to tell only a fraction of the story.

Even though you watch the behind-the-scenes, nuts-and-bolts assembly and disassembly of painted, cardboard-like props and sets in the fore and background (the knight moves 'forward' by staying in place as sets scroll by) of *Black Knight Sword*'s world, it still feels like a living realm, and one with a near-infinite imagination. During our demo the landscape moves from the cobbled streets of a Victorian England to a baroque forest, through midnight caverns and back to medieval castle ramparts. Enemies range from walking chicken-legged idol heads to potato-bodied jugglers. We buy upgrades from a circular cyclopean deity of sorts, ringed with what appear to be mouths. In the urban backgrounds, an air raid circles overhead. The pop of colour, flicking shadows and gushing blood are ever-present. By the time we reach the demo stage's boss, a wooden knight with makeup resembling an onion, it is clear that *Black Knight Sword* belongs to no era, its visual signature a surreal refusal of easy categorisation. Grasshopper's games may not have had commercial success, but its prolific, imagination-led approach still glimmers. ■



Black knight botany

As strange as *Black Knight Sword* is, its use of flora is perhaps the most curious aspect. The opening offstage chorus mentions wormwood, a herb that thematically implies bitterness; the knight's platforming magic, the black hellebore, is named for a poisonous flowering perennial (affiliated with witchcraft in ancient folklore); the knight also collects cat head grass, sometimes referred to as the devil's weed. Akira Yamaoka, BKS's sound-designer-cum-producer, has yet to reveal the significance, if any, of these elements, but one thing is certain – they all hail from parts of Europe and have some dark associations.



DIABLO III

Blizzard proves once again that the devil's in the details

Publisher	Activision Blizzard
Developer	Blizzard Entertainment
Format	Mac, PC
Origin	US
Release	2012



bit.ly/nbuNmf
Diablo III's topics page

A huge encouragement to running multiple characters is the fact that gold and items you've placed in your stash box are tied to your Battle.net account, not the hero, which means every win contributes to your overall campaign



What a difference 11 years makes. Though *Diablo III* doesn't try to play to *Crysis* levels of fidelity, through sheer artistry, attention to detail and variety it pops Sanctuary into solid, vibrant relief from *Diablo II*. Its heroes' animation is magnificent – screenshots reveal subtleties of movement that are almost undetectable in the rush of battle. Skeletons tumble from tomb walls in showers of rubble and dust; zombies pull themselves from the lips of chasms. The world design is rich and diverse, its randomly generated dungeons thick with dank fog, its abandoned cathedrals strewn with books and dribbling candles.

Effectively, the game itself is the same as ever, and mobs and mouse buttons alike will be quaking at the onslaught to come. Not that Blizzard's been afraid to change elements – rather than focus on level stats as the primary source of character development, abilities now steadily power up as you do. You start with two slots, gaining more when you reach certain levels, steadily widening your talent for slaughter as you crisscross the world.

Diablo III's beta features one act, covering a visit to a town under attack by the undead that ends with a battle against Leoric the Skeleton King. The storyline doesn't surprise – its hoary zombie holocaust even includes a

Diablo III's audiovisual feedback fizzes with such bass, splatter and sparks that it feels like it's delivering force feedback, all the more to reinforce the power of your hero's prowess

quest in which you must kill an NPC's wife who has turned into a zombie. But in true Blizzard style, hackneyed themes take on beguilingly epic proportions through succinct but expressive cutscenes, incidental speech and lavish visual effects. It helps, too, that it's told so seamlessly, integrated with the click-splatter of the main action through brief voiceovers and animations – only very rarely does a cutscene wrest control from your index finger, and the interval between exposition and a shower of blood and XP reward is often a fraction of a second. It's a shame the voice work doesn't have better consistency, though. While many NPC voices feature British accents, some incidental figures drawl their Olde English phrases as if from the Old West. The heroes' voices, however clichéd, are carefully characterised, from the gruff Barbarian to the mystical dead-raising Witch Doctor, reinforced through their conversations with NPCs as you hack and slash.

Diablo III's other heroes, the ranged attack specialist Demon Hunter, possibly overly damage-dealing Wizard and nimble martial artist Monk, complete a cast whose specific potentials only begin to make themselves obvious by the beta's end. It doesn't help that the beta's rather easy, restricting the difficulty level to normal, so you're rarely made to explore their abilities. But curiosity is enough to figure out the Monk's knack for racking up combo kills with a blend of Dashing Strike, which slices you through enemies and out of danger, and Deadly Reach, which keeps piling on the blows while keeping you out of melee range. Or the Demon Hunter's Evasive Fire ranged attack, which backflips you away if your target gets too near, combined with Grenades, a spread of three powerful blasts.

Each hero can handle singleplayer runs, but also fits into roles in the four-person multiplayer, the Wizard standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the Demon Hunter at the back while the Barbarian and Monk barrel in. When the game ratchets up the challenge enough, that is. With so much of the beta being easy, playing together tends to devolve into a headlong rampage that both detracts from the atmosphere and leaves little reason to work together. But the essential system is sound – the challenge adapts as parties convene and break up, raising or lowering the number and type of mobs but not their level. Similarly smartly, new players joining more experienced groups are given the vital items they may not have that allow them to sell and break items down into crafting materials while in the field.

For all that it sounds like a thoughtful but fundamentally incremental development on a 15-year-old formula, *Diablo III* doesn't feel like one. And for all that its distant isometric view might threaten to remove you from its action, it has more pacy immediacy than many up-close-and-personal FPSes. Instantly gratifying and enduringly absorbing, it's sure to dominate PC gaming for years to come. ■



Market forces

The beta only just about manages to reveal the scope of *Diablo III*'s wider game, one of item collecting, crafting and commerce. At press time, the auction house was still to be opened, and gathering Pages Of Training to level up the blacksmith enough to get him to craft anything of worth (for which you must gather material) requires tedious grinding through the small number of low-level areas the beta offers. Loot drops shower you with all manner of different goods and occasionally yield legendary items, which glow purple, but there's little need for high firepower when the overall challenge is so low.

HYPE

NINJA GAIDEN 3

Time for the franchise to sneak from the safety of familiar shadows?

Publisher	Tecmo Koei
Developer	Team Ninja
Format	360, PS3, Wii U
Origin	Japan
Release	2012





There are signs Team Ninja is going a bit 'casual' on *Ninja Gaiden*'s traditional high barrier to entry, but the game's still 18-rated, maintaining the series' adult, violent edge



The speed of the animation is striking, with blink-fast manoeuvres including brutal death-dealing blows just a button stab away



bit.ly/nFqLis
Screenshot gallery

The first Xbox *Ninja Gaiden*'s military flavour was largely thrown to the wind by a *Ninja Gaiden II* concerned with mysticism. *NG3* looks set to combine the polarities of industrialised foes and mystical forces

With Tomonobu Itagaki out of Tecmo's picture, many saw an uncertain future for its core IP. How could brands so defined by their auteur's mastery survive without his hand? *Dead Or Alive*'s 3DS debut proved Team Ninja still had the technical brains to deliver beat 'em up brawn, but it is *Ninja Gaiden 3* – with its complex, multi-directional combat and split-second counters – that will be the real test of this new era for the studio.

It comes as no surprise that the game looks good. Very good, in fact, licking along smoothly and pausing only to spill the claret and take in the scenery. It may be a close visual relative of *Ninja Gaiden II*, but the framing is more cinematic and sweeping than that of its predecessor, neutering some of the awkward blind spots that became an occasional nuisance in earlier games.

A London in flames provides the backdrop to our hands-on session, as we hop along foes like stepping stones, diving down to butcher arteries and bone in a brutal ballet of slashes. London itself is a linear battleground, your progress tiered by enemy waves in the series' post-millennial tradition, and the sprint through these grim but glossy streets evokes *Ninja Gaiden II*'s Times Square in both its cartoonish fidelity and non-stop action.

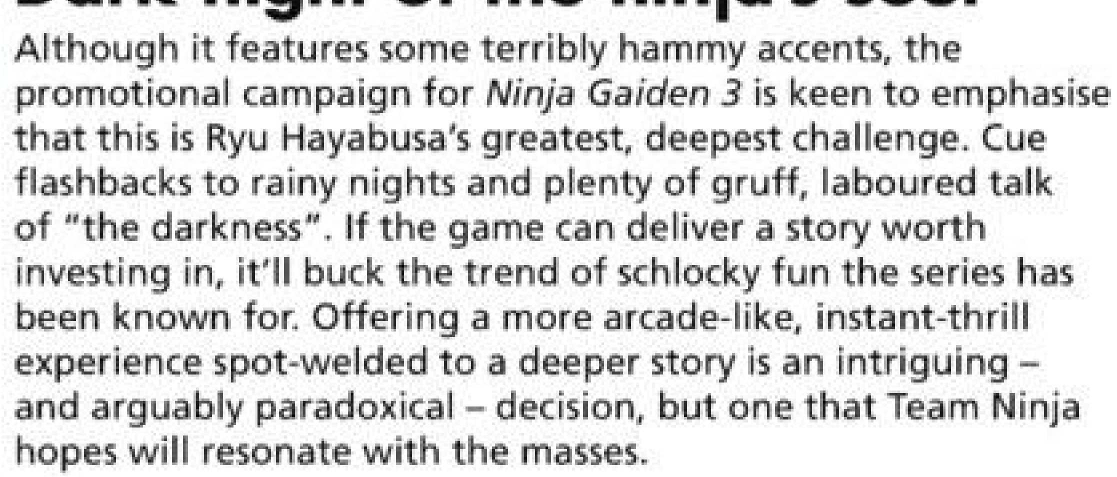
So determined is Team Ninja to entertain that scaling walls becomes a minigame in itself, forcing you to dodge falling debris as you clamber. When it was first unveiled, such gimmickry seemed to taint the series' affinity for economy and bare-bones combat, but in practice the effect is amusing rather than a distraction, adding variety to a gameplay session that might otherwise have been shallow and repetitive. If Team Ninja can't match the depth of new standard-bearer *Bayonetta*'s moveset, such variables are an understandable design decision.

With its always-outnumbered, black-garbed lead and forays into aerial movement, *Ninja Gaiden 3* faces another contender as well. Rocksteady's *Arkham* series is perhaps the game's new marketplace rival, with its noirish setting and crunching combat. Given *Arkham City* is now running riot on consoles (see p104 for our review), *Ninja Gaiden 3* will need tricks beyond QTEs to escape its long, dark shadow.

Indeed, the wealth of such QTEs starts to become invasive until we realise many are tutorials and can be turned off in the options. As with *DOA*'s 3DS touchscreen shortcuts, there's a user-friendliness to *Ninja Gaiden 3* that reflects the team's intention to reach a wider audience. Another result of that drive to mass appeal is a more fleshed-out story, with Team Ninja studio head Yosuke Hayashi taking every press opportunity to discuss protagonist Ryu Hayabusa in terms of who he is as much what he can do. The danger with this approach is that Hayabusa's appeal is his very facelessness. *Ninja Gaiden* previously offered players a hulking, athletic cipher through which to dispense waves of enemies like a silent assassin on a mission (and steroids). If Hayabusa is opened up by the narrative in an extensive manner, his mystery may become a thing of the past.

On this showing, *Ninja Gaiden 3* has the makings of a more arcadey, less-streamlined iteration of one of the genre's biggest names. It's a demonstration of a design team adjusting its ambitions and direction in the wake of an all-powerful leader exiting the building. Just as the *Ninja Gaiden* brand no longer belongs to its hardcore evangelist director, *Ninja Gaiden 3* may be a game that doesn't belong to hardcore fans. ■





Dark night of the ninja's soul

Although it features some terribly hammy accents, the promotional campaign for *Ninja Gaiden 3* is keen to emphasise that this is Ryu Hayabusa's greatest, deepest challenge. Cue flashbacks to rainy nights and plenty of gruff, laboured talk of "the darkness". If the game can deliver a story worth investing in, it'll buck the trend of schlocky fun the series has been known for. Offering a more arcade-like, instant-thrill experience spot-welded to a deeper story is an intriguing – and arguably paradoxical – decision, but one that Team Ninja hopes will resonate with the masses.

When the bigger enemies get their claws on you, you're often snapped into a QTE throwdown: an engaging and immediate way to give you a lifeline when you're so preposterously outsized



The combat delivers some gruesome, bloody moments that reflect Capcom's strong historical ties to the horror genre



H Y
P E

DRAGON'S DOGMA

Has Capcom made its imprint on this east-meets-west design?

Publisher	Capcom
Developer	In-house
Format	PS3, 360
Origin	Japan
Release	Early 2012



Dragon's Dogma seems derivative of everything from Greek myth to *The Elder Scrolls*. The question remains whether it can deliver something unique



bit.ly/pbywaB
Screenshot gallery

At this stage the enemy AI appears to offer little more than erratic behaviour – allowing you and your party to surround the beasts and fire arrows where the sun doesn't shine

With the exception of *Ninja Gaiden 3*, perhaps, *Dragon's Dogma* was the most eye-catching game of the recent Tokyo Game Show. The game signifies a crossroads for Capcom: the point at which it moves wholeheartedly into high-end productions that compete directly with western developers' IP. But having been up close and personal with the title, it's clear there's a war going on between the polarities of the market it wants to penetrate and the stylistic inclinations of its creators.

Having suffered for outsourcing the likes of *Bionic Commando* and *Dark Void* to western studios, Capcom is keeping development of *Dragon's Dogma* internal, with veteran director Hideaki Itsuno overseeing the production. Itsuno's history with some of Capcom's most eccentric titles, most notably the later iterations of *Devil May Cry*, has clearly infused *Dogma* with an undeniably eastern flavour.

The game shines in its animations, with hints of *Monster Hunter* in the swagger of characters, not to mention the hunting itself. There's also a reminder of the JRPG's addiction to customisation in the ability to determine voice, attitude and even specific poses. The realtime combat, however, brings shades of *Resident Evil 4* and *5*, with over-shoulder aiming and boss battles that pit you against some brutal creatures with a penchant for mauling cocky adventurers. As either the Strider class (equipped with a bow) or Warrior (with shield), combat is fast and charged, comparable to dedicated action titles rather than the traditionally hokey hack'n' slash of western RPGs. Showdowns with larger opponents, as arrows and flames rain down among the falling debris, are a further reminder that *Dragon's Dogma* has eyes on blockbuster western appeal, and is presumably one of the reasons Itsuno has been brought in to lend his expertise with dynamic battles and hectic set-pieces.

The Pawn mechanic is Capcom's most prominent innovation in the action-RPG mould. Pawns are essentially customisable sidekicks who can be given a specific strategic role and bring a collaborative element to encounters as they restrain opponents and set up tag-team-style manoeuvres for you to execute. While it provides some thrilling acrobatics and grisly finishers, it can't help but emphasise the lack of co-op with other players. The AI of your three comrades (making up a party of four) is competent, but your lack of control over their tactics is significant. *Demon's Souls'* use of network play hasn't gone unnoticed, however, with players able to send their Pawns to friends' parties.

Dogma's vast world, rendered capably by the MT Framework engine that has given games such as *Lost Planet 2* their sweeping environments, is a place of rich textures but also of cheap and easy borrowings. Where the game stays true to its developer's roots, it excels, but where it copies from rivals, it falters. The landscape has none of the character of a *Monster Hunter* and none of the bite of a *Skyrim*, and as such fails to carve out a personality of its own. The characters and creatures of the world appear to be uninspired derivatives of western archetypes – the Strider is a beardless Aragorn while the oversized animal beasts roaming the lands could be ripped from any me-too MMOG.

The irony here is that the urges Capcom appears to be resisting – to let fly with its famous brand of colourful characters and avant-garde boss designs – are the ones that would make *Dragon's Dogma* something unique in an increasingly busy genre. ■



The beast master

While Capcom's MT Framework does wonders for *Dragon's Dogma*'s scale, delivering a smooth framerate as you traverse the sprawling world, it's the inhabitants that have been given the most care and attention. Seeing one of the mountain-sized monsters charging towards you and your party can be stomach-churning, and taking them down requires a bob-and-weave approach familiar to any player of action games such as *God Of War*. Stocking up on items and armour at one of the game's towns is vital to survival out there: in *Dragon's Dogma*, if you fail to prepare, don't expect to live long.

AGENTS OF CHANGE

Publisher EA
Developer Starbreeze Studios
Format 360, PC, PS3
Release February 21 (US), February 24 (EU)

Starbreeze Studios' corporate restructuring of the legendary Syndicate should be on the shelves in four months. Will it be ready in time?

Jeff Gamon, an executive producer at EA Partners, confesses that he didn't learn the etymology of *Syndicate*'s exotic-sounding codename until just recently. "The name Project RedLime came from the first page of the rough draft of the script," he says. "A side character was heard on the New York Stock Exchange trading floor saying: 'Sell RedLimes at 157'. And that's it. The name stuck."

He is happier to call RedLime by its real name – *Syndicate* – a reboot of Bullfrog's 1993 isometric tactical shooter. A game Gamon loves.

Critics praised the original *Syndicate* for its graphic depictions of violence and novel sci-fi premise: in the future, big business rules, and agents – controlled via satellite by these 'syndicates' – disrupt the competition with violence.

What better time than now, with growing discontent with Wall Street and The City, to produce a bloody, anti-corporate shooter? But the reality is that EA's *Syndicate* reboot has been a long time coming. Leaked concept art pins the idea's genesis to as early as 2005.

"I've been at EA UK for 15 years now," Gamon says. "The people who made *Syndicate* were here when I joined. There's always been, within EA UK, a desire to bring *Syndicate* back. It's always been loved. It's classic."

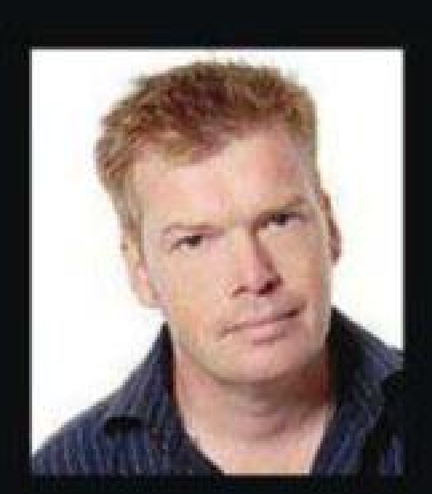
What EA needed most was to meet the right developer, a team willing to partner in *Syndicate*'s creation (as Gamon notes, 'partner' is the operative word in EA Partners). The publisher fielded a number of pitches, but nothing materialised.

In 2007, developer Starbreeze Studios was the new pretty girl in class. During the mid-2000s, the Swedish developer carved its own niche, adapting B-grade properties like The Chronicles Of Riddick and The Darkness into slick firstperson shooters.

Both *Riddick* and *The Darkness* eschew the habits of traditional adaptations. Where competitors venerate their source material, Starbreeze deviates wildly, modifying the plot and art it's been provided as it sees fit. It makes room for brutal melee moves, a mechanic that has quickly become its hallmark. The results are ambitious, unusual and critically admired.

EA wasn't the only publisher courting the hot developer at this time. According to a June 2011 profile on 1UP.com, it was during the tail-end of *The Darkness*'s development cycle that Starbreeze signed a contract with publisher Vivendi (which would later merge with Activision) to create two games: the first an expanded remake of *Riddick*, and the second a new IP entitled *Polaris*.

Polaris never made it out of the gate, failing to gel as a marketable game, so the developer and publisher agreed



Jeff Gamon, executive producer, EA Partners

to a compromise. Starbreeze would focus on improving and expanding the *Riddick* game. This it did, adding an entire new campaign and subtitle, *Assault On Dark Athena*.

However, even with the bonus content, the game was still a last-gen game remade for a current-gen console. Though *Assault On Dark Athena* received positive reviews, it only managed to sell 100,000 copies in North America during its first month on sale.

EA announced its partnership with Starbreeze in 2008, a year before the remake's flop. The partnership echoed the Vivendi contract in that once again Starbreeze would make two games. The first would be based on Robert Ludlum's Jason Bourne franchise, and the second, a reboot of one of EA's most acclaimed classic franchises. EA called it Project RedLime.

As Gamon describes it, "[EA and Starbreeze] kind of came together as a marriage." The honeymoon was short-lived, however. In September 2008 the global economy fell into a recession, and EA's stock declined. Wedbush-Morgan analyst **Michael Pachter** had this to say in a December 2008 note to investors: "With the stock hovering near a seven-year low, management continued its recent history of disappointment. We are no longer confident that EA is taking the steps necessary to achieve its FY:11 goals of $6 billion in revenue and $1.5 billion in operating profit."

Starbreeze's problem was the polar opposite. It was growing too fast. The company currently has around 80 employees, along with the aegis of EA Partners, a smattering of co-workers that visit on a weekly basis.

"Technology has moved on massively. The new Syndicate is a product for now"

Some employees were yearning for the way things used to be, the Starbreeze that forged the first iteration of *Riddick*. In 2009, seven senior employees, including Starbreeze founder Magnus Högdahl, left the company to form MachineGames, also based in Sweden.

In February 2010, EA announced plans to focus more resources on internally developed titles. According to COO **John Schappert** during an analyst conference call: "While we have great relationships with our partners, we are modelling a reduction in our distribution business as we concentrate on higher-margin EA-owned titles and digital initiatives."

A number of EA Partners' games were cancelled over the months that followed, including Starbreeze's Jason Bourne adaptation. The decision was made by EA. The deal again calls to mind the Vivendi contract; the cancellation of one game, the renewed focus on another.

In November 2010, Bethesda Softworks acquired MachineGames, which had recently taken on at least 15 more former Starbreeze employees. And in February 2011, CEO **Johan Kristiansson** left Starbreeze to take a job outside of the videogame industry entirely.

As these staff members made their exits, the company trod onward. Gamon confirms that around Kristiansson's departure the team began prepping a playable demo, a crucial step towards introducing *Syndicate* to the public. Tentatively, the developer and publisher planned to pull back the curtain on what was still publicly being called Project RedLime at the San Francisco Game Developers Conference in March 2011. That plan fell through, as did plans to announce the game at the Electronic Entertainment Expo in June and Gamescom in August.

"Time adds up, I guess," Gamon says in reference to the delays.

Finally, on September 12 this year, *Syndicate* was officially announced via a press release. Included were a handful of screens and a release date: February 21, 2012 – a mere five months away, an unusually short turnaround, especially for such an ambitious game. For the sake of comparison, fellow FPS *BioShock Infinite* was announced on August 12, 2010 and still doesn't have an official release date. As Gamon notes: "It [was] late to announce it, but we're in a position now where we have really strong software."

Now, here in Las Vegas, EA has invited the press to go hands-on with a *Syndicate* demo for the first time, but not before hearing out Starbreeze's new CEO, Kristiansson's successor **Mikael Nermark**. He stands on a small stage in a posh hotel conference room. "We're bringing back what made it great," Nermark reiterates, before cueing a *Syndicate* trailer that resembles footage from an explosive summer blockbuster. Loud. Fast. Colourless. There is light applause, then everyone files into an elevator car and up to a penthouse crammed with publicists and HDTVs.

In the first few minutes of the press demo, an unnerving disconnect between Nermark's description of Syndicate and the actual *Syndicate* videogame becomes obvious. The new *Syndicate* is a firstperson shooter replete with ostentatious weapons and faceless goons, a departure from the slower, more ominous original. Where is the evidence of DNA from the original game the CEO had promised?

The new perspective isn't a total surprise. EA had coyly hinted at the change way back in its 2008 press release, in which then Starbreeze CEO Kristiansson said: "We're excited to bring a new perspective and gameplay innovation to this beloved fiction."

Also, *Syndicate*'s new genre leaked months earlier on to Internet forums, where numerous fans expressed their displeasure. Nermark says he doesn't let the forums get

TACTICAL SHIFT

Syndicate isn't breaking any new ground adapting an isometric tactical shooter franchise as an FPS. *SWAT 4* made the genre switch in 2005, and *Fallout 3* followed suit in 2008. Both games were well received by critics and consumers, despite initial scepticism on the Web. And *X-COM*, released a year after the original *Syndicate*, is currently being rebooted as an FPS, facing similar backlash on the Internet. After a rough presentation at E3 2010 which emphasised blasting balls of black gloop, developer 2K Marin scrapped much of what it showed in the demo. *X-COM* returned to E3 2011 refreshed, an FPS that included pre-mission planning and commanding a squad in thirdperson mid-firefight. Who says devs don't read forums?

to him. "We always try to stay true to the core elements of a franchise," he says, "but we also need to make it our own game. I would love it if we could make everyone happy, but that's impossible. You just have to make conscious decisions and believe in them."

"We went to Starbreeze because of their history of taking an IP and treating it appropriately," Gamon explains. "So many IPs just end up like an interactive translation of the media they started from, whereas what I think makes Starbreeze such a great partner for us is their ability to take an idea, a universe, and actually sculpt a great videogame done right – regardless of the IP almost. The game comes first."

Gamon is correct. Both *The Chronicles Of Riddick* and *The Darkness* have been praised because they feel like games produced by creative people who maybe don't care passionately about the property but relish making games – a point Gamon agrees with. "Though," he adds, "in the case of *Syndicate*, they do like the property."

As Gamon sees it, "Technology has moved on [since the original *Syndicate*]. Our ability to put you in the shoes of an agent, our ability to tell great stories as well, has moved on massively over the last 15 or 18 years. The new *Syndicate* is a product for now."

A few minutes into the demo, a few elements you might call *Syndicate*-esque begin to emerge: most notably, the story. In the future, civilians voluntarily receive chip implants that wirelessly communicate with the world's data. It's like having an Internet connection implanted in your head.

The chip rewards its carriers with access to everything from schools to healthcare. In return, syndicates – the companies creating and injecting these chips – gain unfettered access to all the juicy private info in the civilians' brains. Syndicates are the Facebook, Google and Apple of 2039.

Another respectful nod to the original *Syndicate* involves the game's deliberate emphasis on hacking, mind control and extreme violence. For example, the game's protagonist, an augmented operative for Eurocorp named Miles Kilo, has the ability to target computers or humans and force them to do any number of things – the favourite of the room being a mind hack in which the victim plucks out a grenade and detonates it in his hand, extinguishing himself and anyone nearby.

The move can be compared to the original *Syndicate*'s Persuadertron, a weapon that took control of enemy combatants as well as civilians, who would fight on your side if you led them over dropped weapons. Here, there appears to be no weapon, just a chip called the DART 6 installed in Kilo's brain. The DART 6 is able to 'breach' other humans' chips and take control.

And yet, as much as the *Syndicate* demo shows genuine reverence for the original, the game still behaves very much like Starbreeze's previous work. The animations are cold, sharp and grotesque. Though not quite melee attacks, the player does have the ability to kill in a variety of ways beyond the usual point-gun-and-shoot model.

"We wanted to create a game that felt like our game as well," Nermark says. "A game for us. For this time. We thought *Syndicate* is a great game. A great classic franchise. We want to make a great new *Syndicate*... it's a game that plays to Starbreeze's strengths."

The demo, like many first previews, has its rough spots, which normally wouldn't be worth mentioning, but considering the four-month timeframe and pre-alpha status, we wonder how much work and polish remains. And what can realistically be achieved? After the demo, Nermark and Gamon shake hands with the guests. There's no consternation, panic attacks or sweat-stained armpits betraying signs of anxiety, and both appear to be in good spirits, joking about the approaching deadline.

Gamon calls this period in a game's development the "blitzkrieg". Nermark describes the atmosphere at Starbreeze as, "Long days and nights. Everyone is hard at work. This is the exciting phase of game development. Personally, I love this time."

Gamon thinks the quick turnaround should appeal to consumers who will get the game sooner rather than later. Neither Nermark nor Gamon seem particularly pleased or displeased with the looming release date. Neither gives a clear answer as to who set it.

"I guess to a degree that when we come out is governed by the project development and the resources," Gamon says, before adding, "but also by when the publisher feels it needs the game."

Gamon concludes our discussion with a warm, if not altruistic point: "My job is to get the best possible product to market that I can. It's always ready when it's ready, I think, and if I can win that argument, and say [to EA] give me more time, give me more money, and win that business case, and convince them that they're going to get a great game, then I win."

Does Gamon think he's won in the case of *Syndicate*? "Yeah," he says. "I think so." ■

The original *Syndicate* (below) was released in 1993, a very different time in the game industry: EA was still referred to as Electronic Arts; Sony and Microsoft had yet to enter the videogame console business; famed lead designer Peter Molyneux was working at Bullfrog on *Syndicate*, but as a producer; and *Doom*, the game that would popularise the firstperson shooter genre to the ire of many tactical strategy game fans, was months away from existence





RIGHT In the original *Syndicate*, the player directed four disposable cyborgs on their messy missions. The reboot stars only Miles Kilo, an employee of Eurocorp looking something like an older Nathan Drake







RIGHT "[*Syndicate*] is a classic franchise," Gamon says, "which you can do an awful lot with. And we have done an awful lot with it." This includes adding new classes to the original's mix of agents, civilians and police



STAR TALENT

Jens Matthies worked at Starbreeze for 11 years (1998-2009) as art director and creative director, and is currently the creative director at Starbreeze exile MachineGames. "Joining forces with Bethesda," he says, "has given us opportunities we could never dream of before. We finally have the support and resources necessary to create the best work of our lives."

"There are a lot of marketing-driven modes of operation in this business," he continues, "and we feel truly blessed to be working alongside people who, like us, value the quality of the game higher than anything else."

"The guys who left to form MachineGames had an opportunity," Gamon says, "and they wanted to take it. What that's meant for Starbreeze is, well, like any company you grow and you mature. You lose people and you gain people. We lost people who had been at Starbreeze for a while and had a lot of secret knowledge, but at the same time, Starbreeze brought in a lot of people with secret knowledge from the outside. I think the results you see speak for themselves."

MachineGames isn't prepared to announce its next project – though its job page has an opening for a senior engine programmer to "maintain game and engine systems for an action FPS".



PITCH DARK

Ontario developer Digital Extremes will release *The Darkness II* on February 7 – two weeks before *Syndicate*. The sequel brings a new cel-shaded look to the game, and adds a quad-wielding mechanic for those who've always wanted to use a gun along with their spectral demon arms.

Nermark says the studios are in communication, and have a mutual respect for one another's work. "We met [Sheldon Carter, creative director at Digital Extremes] at E3 and saw [*The Darkness II*] at Gamescom," he says. "We have great love for *The Darkness* as well. They're making their game like we're making our *Syndicate*. They've taken a different view than we did, but they've made a great product."









ABOVE The future world of *Syndicate* is sharp, bleak and busy. Influences range all the way from Blade Runner to *Deus Ex*, but with plenty of details *Syndicate* can call its own. **LEFT** Starbreeze promises action set-pieces beyond the traditional running and gunning. And is that an Atlantic Accelerator?

CENTRE In the metropolis of the future, east meets west. **ABOVE** Much of *Syndicate*'s world is hackable: soldiers, computers and security turrets can all come under your control



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Riot
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manifesto:

developers versus publishers

david braben

founder, frontier developments

roger walkden

senior director of business development, ea partners

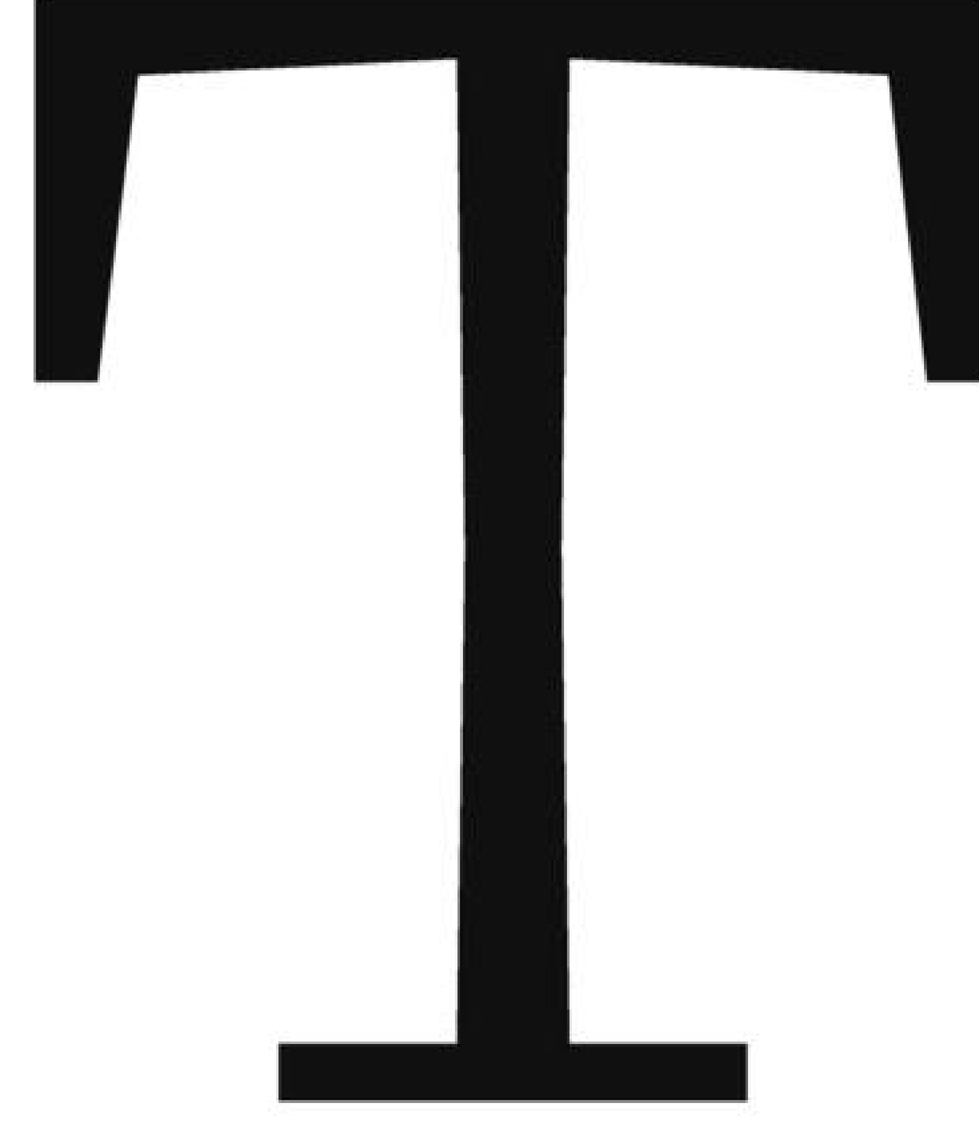
ben board

european developer account manager, microsoft

how the modern game industry revolution is reshaping the relationship between creators and distributors







he videogame industry has never stood still, but today change feels particularly rapid. New platforms, new marketplaces, new audiences and new interfaces have forged a new world of self-publishing, iterative development, vast budgets and fresh opportunities. Such pervasive change is bound to reshape the traditional relationships between developers and publishers.

Here, we invite three diversely experienced industry figures to discuss the revolution: Microsoft's **Ben Board**, who co-runs Microsoft's European developer relations for Xbox 360; **Roger Walkden**, senior director of business development for EA Partners; and **David Braben**, founder of Frontier Developments, one of Europe's largest independent developers. We begin by discussing an issue that lies at the heart of videogame production.

What kind of space do developers need in order to be most creative?

David Braben We need creative people and the ability to have control of that. Our team worked hard on *LostWinds* partly because of its shorter development time, and partly because we had control over the whole process. That is very empowering. What we've been able to do is properly implement processes that we wanted to, and deliver them. One thing I believe in is making prototypes. But when we say we're doing prototypes, for the publisher quite often we have to make them look pretty, which increases the time and cost. But with Microsoft we've been able to do prototypes where we don't have to make it look pretty. Red box prototypes are where we don't try to make it look pretty but it feels very close to the full experience. We did that with *LostWinds*, and we could be confident it would be great. This is what's changed from a dev perspective in the industry over the past few years. Five years ago we couldn't have done prototypes. Someone would have said it looked rubbish. But the presumption now is that eventually it will look beautiful.

Ben Board Kinect development encourages that approach, I think. It's about testing the mechanic. It's about trying out new interfaces to see what feels good and what works. It's difficult to predict what's actually going to play well, compared to what you think will play well.

DB It's a challenge to overcome the challenges, and it's the exciting part, it's the creative part of game development. I think we should be prototyping in broader games as well, to get the experience right. I don't imagine there's a lot of prototyping for FPS games because they actually are similar to games that are already out there.

Roger Walkden What we found at EA is that you can segment the games into different types of shooter. So *Crysis 2* is a sci-fi game, *Medal Of Honor* is a gritty *Modern Warfare*-style game, and all the way through to *Battlefield* where you've got the ability to get in and out of different craft. So each has its standalone features, which allows us to create an aligned goal between each of those teams and what EA is looking for. You can't force that partnership. It has to evolve into something that works for both parties. As an example, so many times a meeting will start with a dev saying: "Tell me what EA is looking for". Please don't start with that question! Because if I was to give you the answer to that then I'll end up with a hundred pitches for whatever it is I'm thinking about this week. And I don't want that. I need to know you guys have the passion and talent to come up with a game that's strong enough to compete with the *Battlefields* and the *FIFAs*, and then we can take it forward and sell it to the publishing arm. That's my role. So many of them will fall apart as you try to get them through the peaks and troughs of the project, but it's great to see them succeed.

DB Looking at a game like *LostWinds*, how could we have done that through a publishing route? We didn't have a credible demo and yet we shipped three months later. There isn't time to get all the relationships to align with the rate of change that's going on in the project, so it comes down to trust. If you have a demo that looks ugly but feels great, then there's the potential to turn it into something commercially beautiful that won't get criticised for being rubbish.



From left: Roger Walkden, David Braben and Ben Board

RW From a dev's perspective that makes sense, because it's clear that you guys wear your hearts on your sleeves, so it's quite clear what your goals are. It can be quite frustrating coming to EA as a developer if you can't get that message across. I had conversations with people at the Develop conference where they didn't even bother to bring their materials with them because they didn't think I would be interested. And I'm like: "Of course I'm interested – that's my role!" It's upsetting for me that people would think that, but I can understand why they'd come to that conclusion. It's very difficult to get a new project off the ground because the quality bar is so high, and to get the funding, which can be tens of millions of dollars. Every single one of those decisions is taken very seriously. I call it the soup test: you have to look the developer in the eye and say: "Are you going to be able to deliver for me?" Is he going to look you back in the eye and say: "Yes, absolutely, Roger." Or is he going to look down into his soup? A lot of it comes down to trust at the end of the day. This is a people business.

DB Doing the first deal with the publisher is by far the hardest, because you're establishing the level of trust. We've worked with some great publishers and had a hard time – LucasArts, for example – but it gets easier over time.

BB When you said people were coming to you and didn't think they had the chops to meet your bar, do you think they did? Do you then try encourage them to believe in themselves?

RW It's a bit like the X-Factor, really. Unless you put yourself in front of the panel you're never going to find out if you're any good compared to everyone else. That's my frustration. You need people to come to you. It might not be the right time for them to be able to prove their worth, but relationships have to start on a one-to-one basis, and if we ever want to get to that point, I want them to know that there's an inlet there for them to explore. But if they haven't done that, a great game could go to another publisher. That's not my goal.

DB One of the challenges is that while the market is changing, the bigger the organisation, the harder it is to make a decision quickly. You have a lot of different groups to buy into whatever the idea is. It's a many-to-one relationship that takes such a long time to resolve that there are publishers we've not dealt with. But not that we've not wanted to. You can only make so many games, and some might not happen because certain people can make decisions a lot faster than others.

RW We've suffered from that in the past, and we've tried to correct a bit of it. The idea of a multiplatform release can now be iOS, browser, Facebook, and maybe XBLA. EA sits across at least three divisions, and we've loved some games and failed to get them off the ground with us because we haven't joined the dots inside our own company. We're getting a lot better at that now; our digital focus requires us to work across quite disparate divisions.

How are changes to the way games can be distributed affecting the way you do business today?

DB One of the contrasts between services like Xbox Live and Apple's App Store is the vast amount of content and the problem of discovery. In the '90s, [magazine] coverdiscs exploded and we ended up damaging sales, because it always made sense to do a coverdisc, but there was just so much free playtime around that people were buying fewer games. That's something we've got to be careful with.

RW In terms of discovery, it's an age-old problem the industry has suffered from that hasn't gone away, it's just changed. Getting on the front page of the Xbox dashboard, for instance, is the same problem as getting in the front window of a game shop. It requires thought from a marketing perspective. These are the things that devs forget when they go into the heady world of self-publishing. You forget that to do successful self-publishing you have to actually do some publishing! A dev isn't normally set up to do that. What we've found is that there are people who went down the self-

"Getting on the front page of the Xbox dashboard is the same problem as getting in the front window of a game shop"

roger walkden

publishing route two or three years ago who have now pulled themselves out.

DB We self-published *LostWinds* and did a lot of legwork trying to get coverage in the US – physically travelling around and making sure we had editorial. But it's a big job, and we only scratched the surface. Microsoft brings that to the table – the opportunity to get your voice heard over this astonishingly loud clamour.

RW It's a tough trade-off for a developer. They have to weigh up the difference between revenue and limiting the potential for volume, or losing some margin but gaining the ability to sell across a lot of platforms. I see devs making that choice a lot. And it's a tough one. Which side of the fence do you want to jump?

BB RedLynx set up its business to be across lots of platforms, and they've got great relationships with us, but their new game is a WiiWare exclusive [*MotoHeroz*, see review in **E233**] and I wish them good luck – I'm sure it'll be awesome, and obviously I'd much rather have it on my platform!

RW They've almost gone and tested a platform. They've gone the EA route as well, because they worked with Chillingo on *DrawRace 2*.

BB I love those guys!

RW I can imagine a situation where RedLynx starts to move down a single route that suits it better. They try a bit of self-publishing, but eventually they're going to find they come back to one of us!

DB Each of these different routes has different audiences. We've modelled the difference between going single and multiplatform and the effect it has on audiences. Actually, a large section of people have more than one machine. It comes down to how much coverage you get and how much your [publishing] partner is behind it. That's the key thing. One of the problems of diluting focus is you dilute focus from the marketing perspective. And that's one of the challenges.

BB From a dev relations point of view we really like our firstparty games. We help everybody, but especially those who are developing for our platform. We have a special love for those guys.

Microsoft needs to push Kinect, EA needs to push Origin – how do you get your developers to align with your companies' key objectives?

BB Fundamentally, I'm a Microsoft guy, but I think Kinect is an amazing bit of technology. But more importantly it'll allow for new experiences, and that's what we're here for. Listening to David talk about making *Disneyland Adventures*, a lot of the way he describes that is about the passion of exploring the new. It gets us out of bed in the morning. Underpinning the Kinect strategy is the fact that it's a cool thing that's easy to get excited about. We try to spread that good news and what Kinect can do. I see developers get excited about that all the time, from a design and a technical point of view. The firstparty games we've launched on Kinect have been tremendously successful, the platform has been successful, which in turn shows we weren't wrong in thinking this was an experience the wider world was interested in. The publishers in turn become interested and see a viable market there.

DB We're only beginning to look at Kinect, but there's a whole dimension to look at. Fantastic voice recognition, for example, which so far has only been supplemental. Where that can go is very exciting from a game design perspective. Touchscreen controls on iPad and Android are also very interesting. Year-on-year, the rate of change in this industry is still phenomenal. It took years for us to build a vocabulary for an analogue controller, and there was a lot of resistance from gamers around that, because the move from keyboard and mouse was seen as a travesty. We're forever moving on, and the old doesn't go away. At the start of Microsoft's E3 keynote was *Call Of Duty* – it's still a core game that's not gone away; games like *COD* and *Battlefield 3* will sell in prodigious numbers. The only sad thing is that so much of the budget goes on this very narrow group of people. And there's this other great space out there of games we could be making, which I count *Disneyland* as one, and *Limbo* – probably my favourite game of last year. Let's make more of those! I'll get shot for this! I do enjoy shooters but for me as a gamer, I'm getting a bit tired of similar types of gameplay. I think some things *Battlefield* has introduced are great, by the way. We should applaud where we see new, and avoid doing rehashes with better graphics. I applaud the very different, though.

RW One of the things we're hoping to achieve is the ability for devs to work with EA in a different way, and encourage some of those games we've been talking about to come through. A dev can have an inlet into EA's userbase to be able to sell their own game, which hasn't existed before in a crossplatform way. And Origin will be the first time we'll be able to see how a game can be marketed and how a community can come together to help proliferate a new product that's owned and run by the dev, and not necessarily by EA. Although EA can still have a part to play in it, as a partner. It's doubled the chances of taking a game forward inside EA. I truly think it'll be the start of something new, something that's not been seen before. ■

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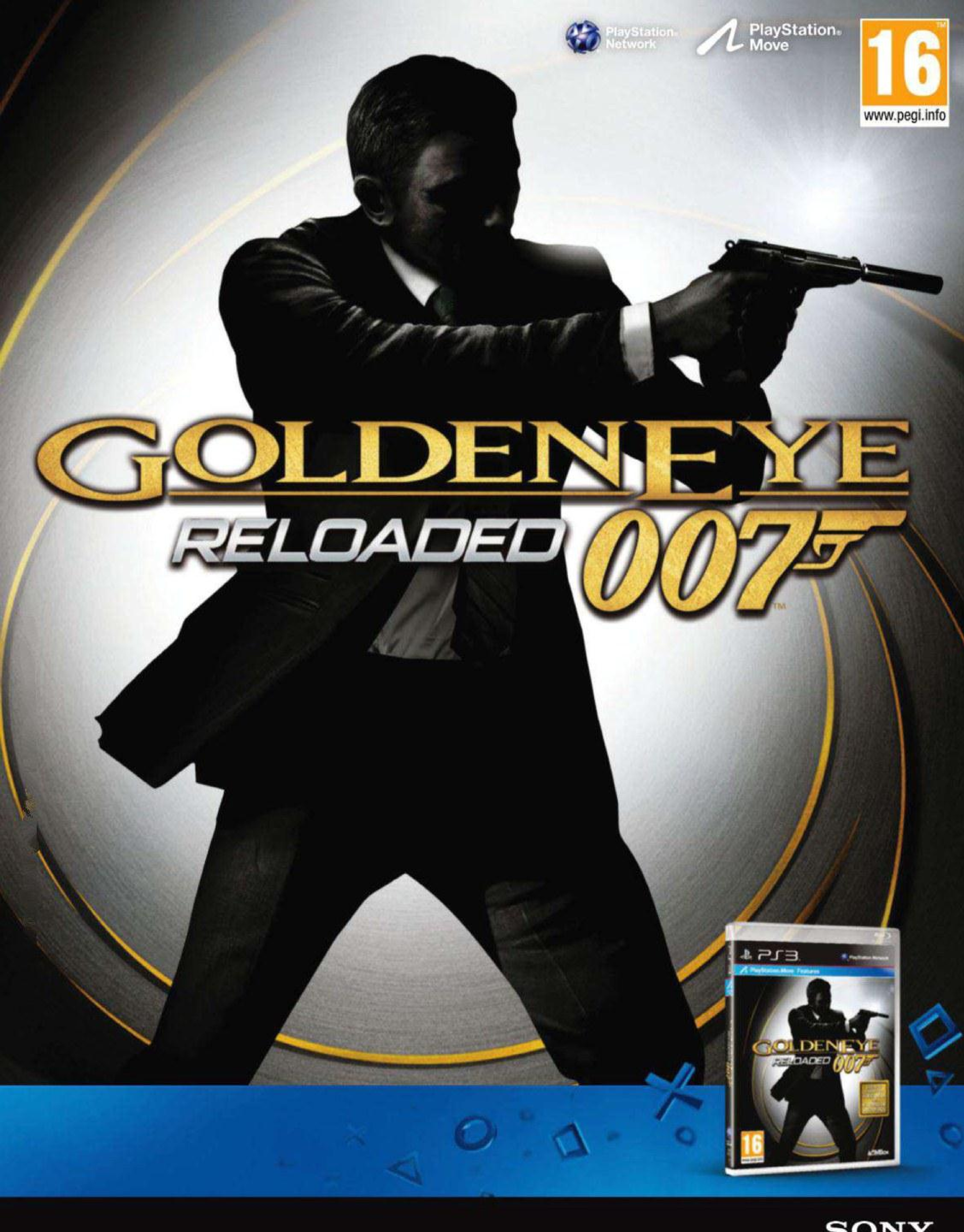
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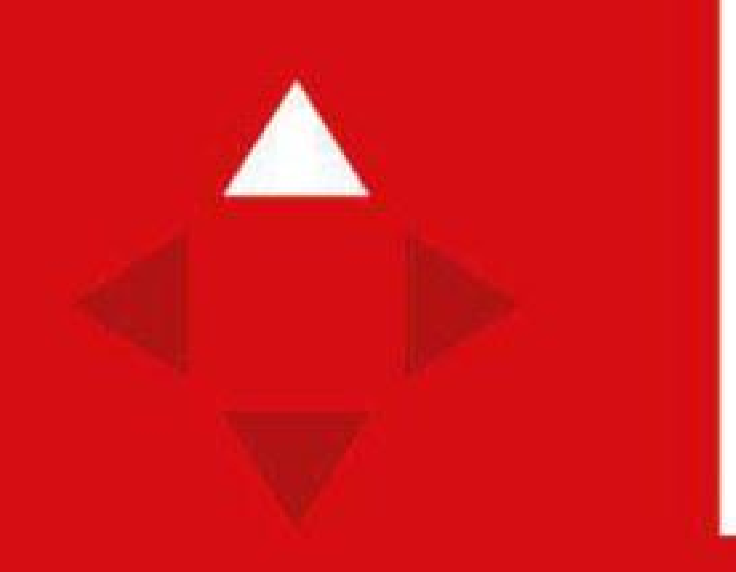
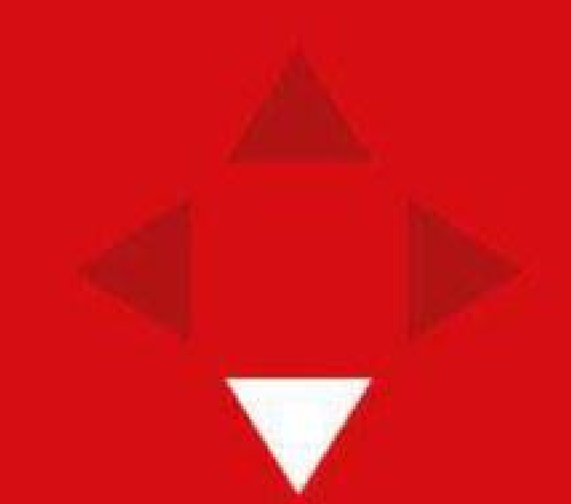


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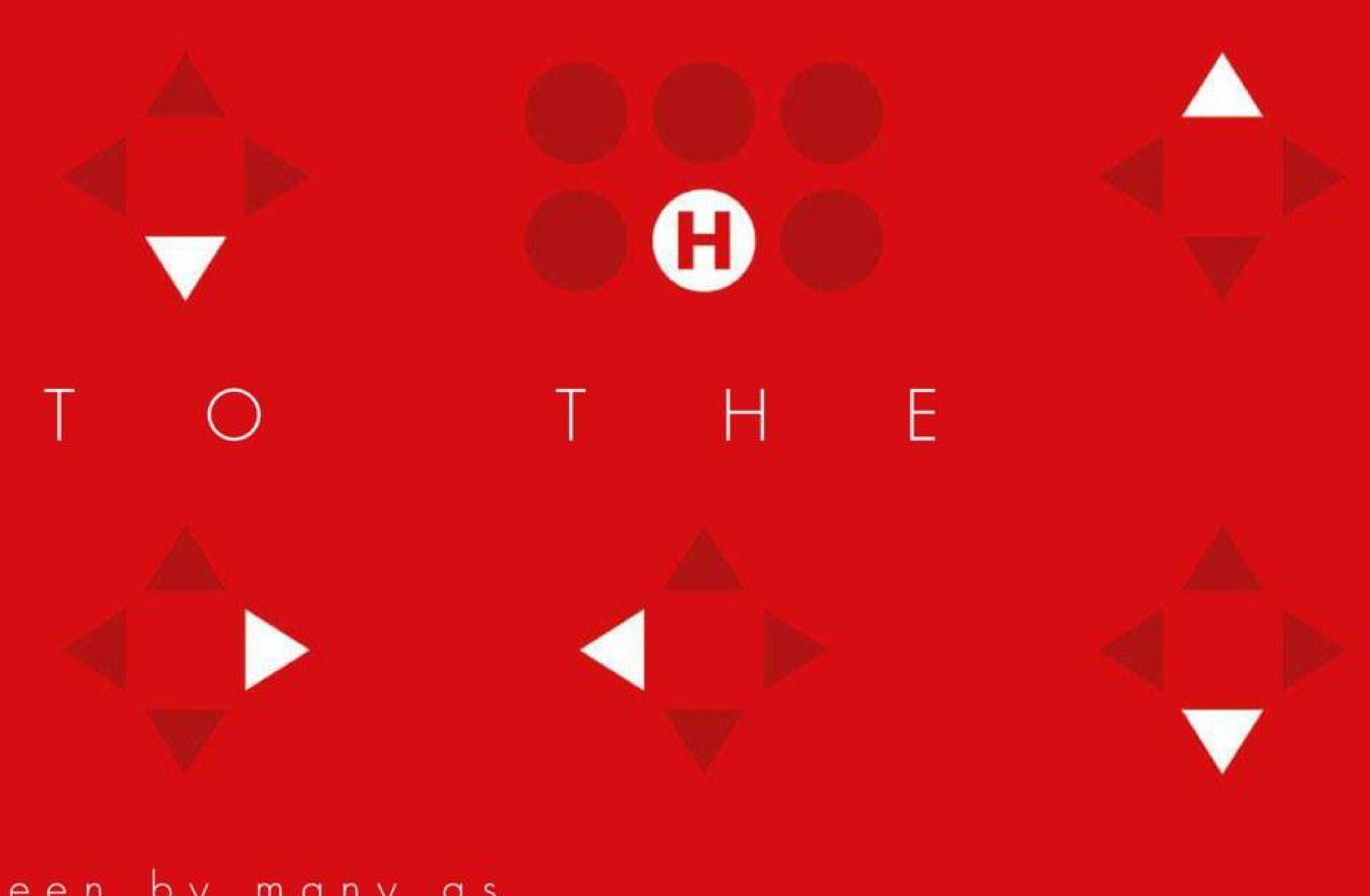




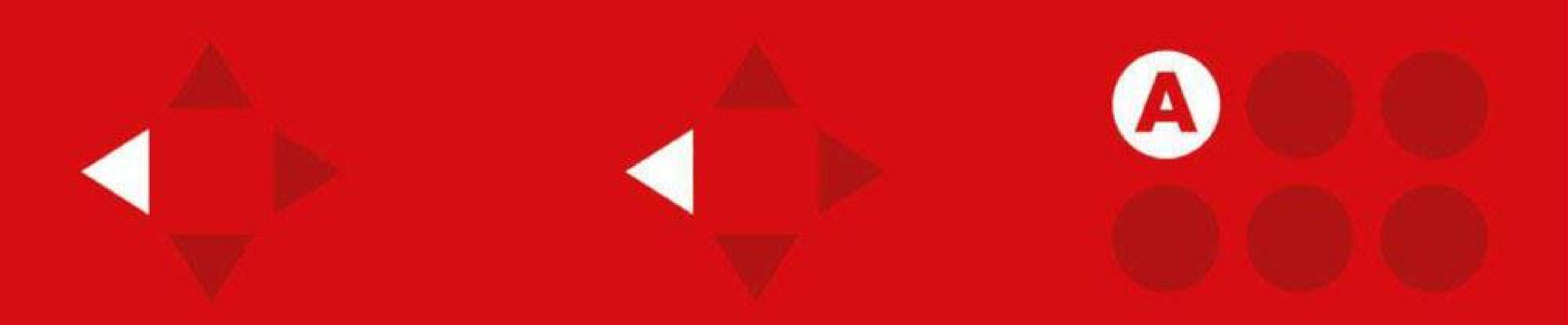
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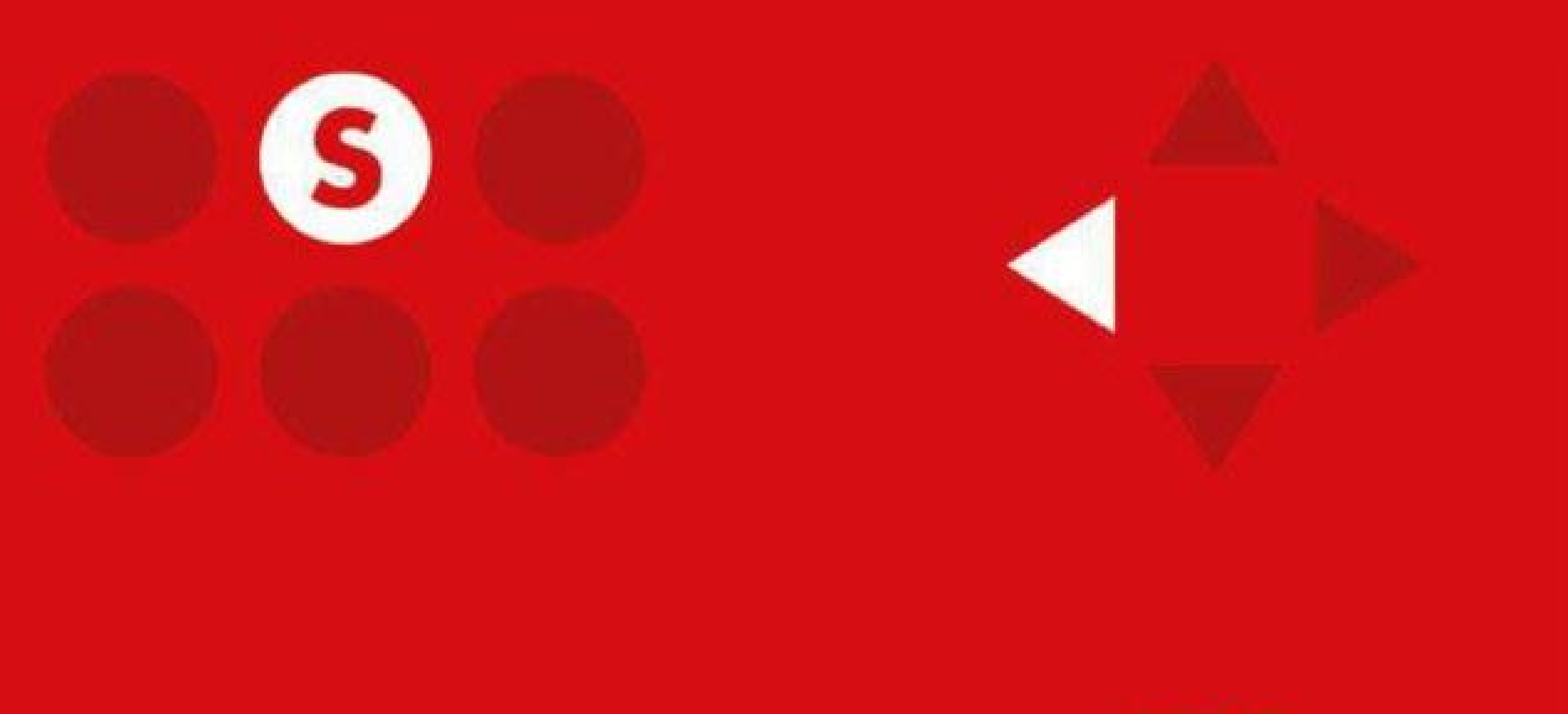


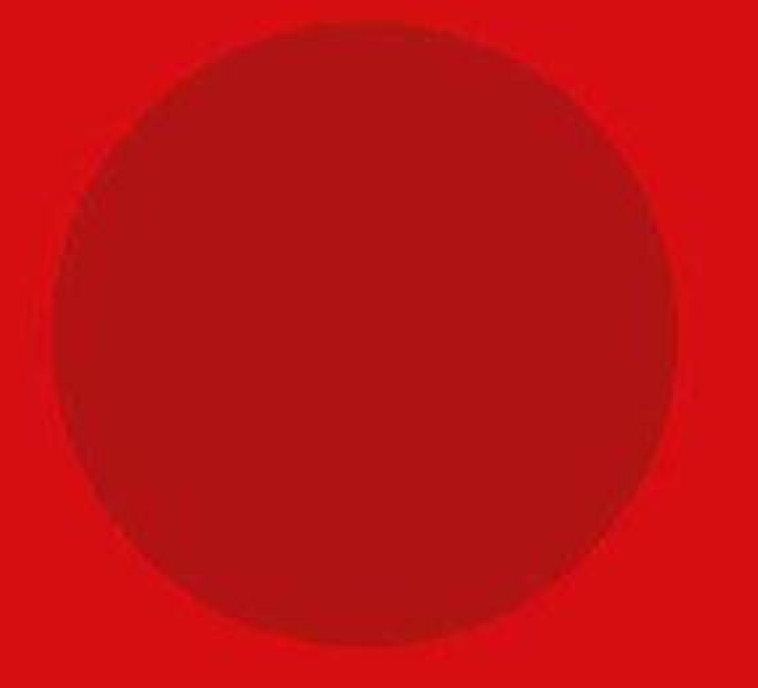
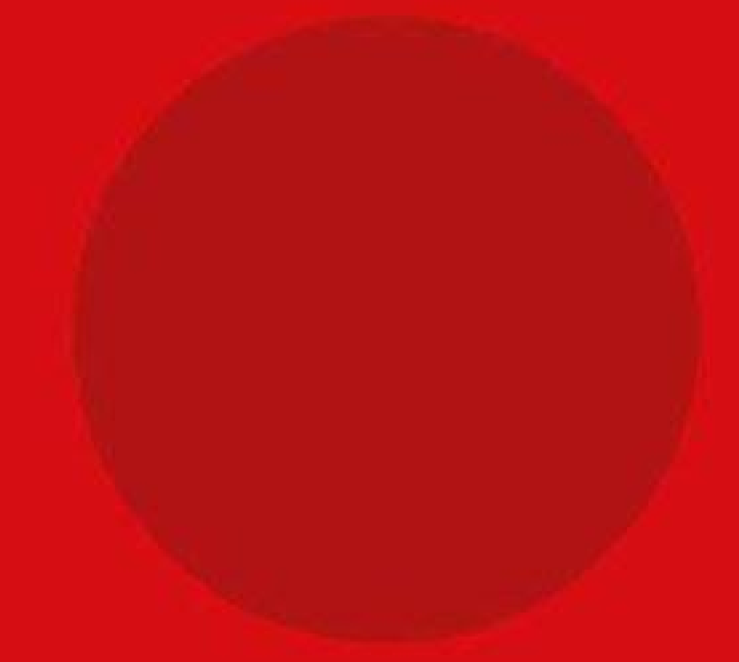
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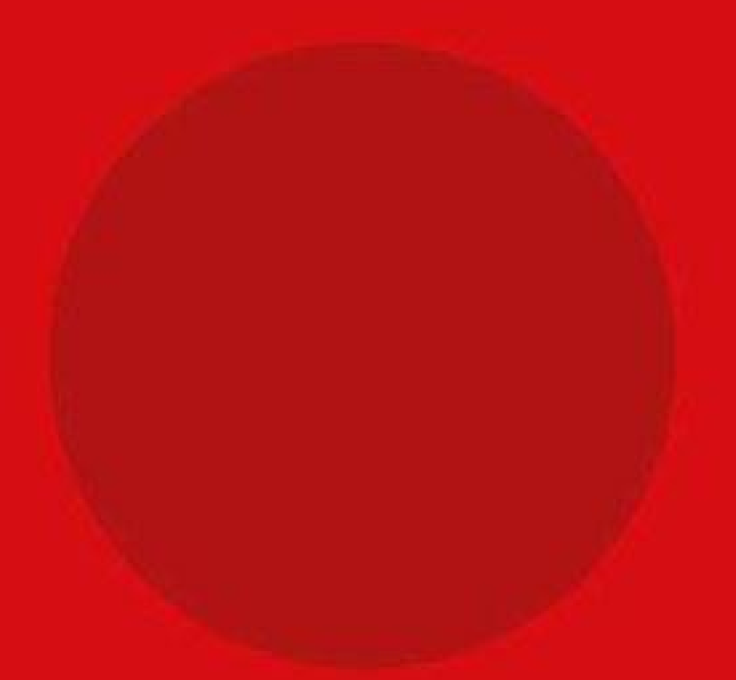
cheats are in decline. Or are they?









This is a generation that's seen more climate change than any in gaming history; extinction seems to be everywhere you look. Exaggeration, too. Kids born in 2011 will likely never buy a boxed software product. Maybe they'll miss out on health packs, or even, as hard as it is to believe, the release of a new Dreamcast scrolling shoot 'em up. But cheats? Surely there will always be cheats?

Reading some of the scare stories on the matter, what's clear is that cheats have become one of those gaming heirlooms prized fiercely by those who were there at the start. They're a symbol of a forgotten intimacy between player and developer; of absolute ownership and the right to play as you choose; of simpler times, when everyone's needs were the same.

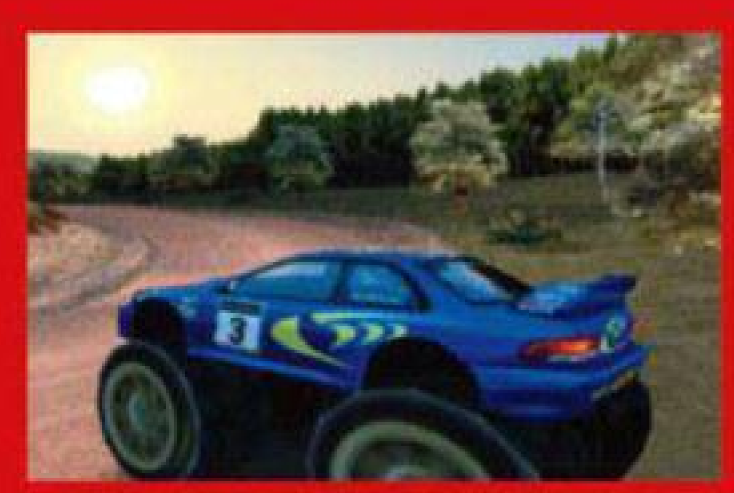
There's plenty of reason to think they're under threat too. On the console side of things, you have the rise of multiplayer and the realtime policing of progression. Bragging rights are now the chief currency of the console marketplace, attached to every hour, chapter, option and kill. They've created a mindset shaped by the Gamerscore, where progress must be earned and cheating is borderline 'theft'. DLC, furthermore, has put a real-world price tag on in-game advantages, making the idea of, heaven forbid, *giving* players an exploit seem rather old-fashioned.

PCs got there first, of course, the vast and fragile economies of MMOGs turning 'cheat' into a more pejorative term than ever. A criminal charge to the virtual vendors and mega-corporations who turn even time into money. Games evolved into services, keeping stats, the stuff of your classic cheat code, locked up in online vaults.

Doomsaying like this, though – as great as it can read beneath a 'cheats are dead' headline – is far too circumstantial to describe, much less fix, the problem of cheats in modern games. What *is* the problem, even? Are publishers and developers robbing us of something integral to gaming: our right to break the rules that don't suit us? Or is this another case of over-entitled gamers being blind to the realities of making modern games? To put it another way, is anything actually wrong with today's games?

"Player entitlement to cheating has too many factors to have a right or wrong approach," says Ruffian Games producer **James Cope**. "Everything in development has a cost and every player has a pretty good perception



TOP **A trainer for *GTAIV* gives you control over weather conditions, among other things.** CENTRE ***Deus Ex: Human Revolution*'s debug mode enables a map selector for super-fast travel.** ABOVE ***Colin McRae Rally 2* included a cheat for monster-truck wheels, allowing you to drive over other racers**

of value. Somewhat annoyingly, I have to sit on the fence and say that every game has to be evaluated differently. Primarily, that's because the difference between cheating in a singleplayer experience versus a competitive online experience is massive, with vastly different implications."

A veteran of both *Crackdown* games, Cope has worked as closely with Microsoft's games division – with Xbox 360 and all that it stands for – as anyone. To a fan of cheats, this fact alone should put him squarely in bed with the enemy. *Crackdown* is the quintessential Achievement hunt, and a pioneer of both DLC and Live-enabled multiplayer. It is the ultimate product of an ecosystem many blame for killing our right to cheat, yet it's also the ultimate cheat game. Blasting through the game at whichever speed and in the order you like, trampling all in your path, you'd think it had been actually *compiled* from those old-fashioned cheat codes, with all of them being switched on by default.

This kind of freedom, though, certainly isn't free, as Cope explains: "*Crackdown* gave away the Keys To The City – effectively a cheat mode DLC – free twice, but it wasn't cheap to do. That was a decision based on value in the player's eyes and how we wanted them to have fun with the game, rather than any up-front decision on pricing or ownership.

"With both games, we've wanted players to see and experience as much content as possible. [The] fact is that the majority of people don't finish games, so a large proportion of players wouldn't progress all their skills to [the] max and miss out on the game's best content. We really wanted players to see the cool stuff you can do as a maxed-out agent, and Keys To The City was the creative solution.

"The negative was that it did have a big impact on QA and everything had to be tested in multiple passes with multiple configs of cheats active. Keys To The City generated a lot of bugs after launch and we had to do a lot of custom work on top of what we already had in the shipping version to remove all the edge-case crashes and lockups. The original Keys To The City, even after all the extra test effort, shipped with a bug that wiped some players' save game, and [that] was a worst nightmare come true. It was fixed quickly, but was a really grim moment."

It's testament to rigorous QA processes that we sometimes forget that games are more volatile now than ever, full of untamed forces. Their effects could be on physics, progression, or the integrity, as Cope mentions, of a save game. If we're talking about a player's right to play at a chosen pace, the furore over cheats is nothing compared to a game-breaking bug and its consequences: the anger that turns to mocking, trolling and rubbernecking.



Like many of the conspiracy theories about being alternately nickel-and-dimed and shortchanged by modern gaming, the bottom line with cheats is that they're expensive. Even the little ones. What a modder could add with a casual flick of their hex editor can take dozens, if not hundreds, of man hours to test in an actual release build. Developers don't have the luxury of saying, "Use at your own risk". None of which means they can't do the QA, of course. Take *Red Faction: Guerrilla*, *Grand Theft Auto IV* and *Rock Band*, for example – the cheats are still there, but at what cost?

"We haven't done anything generally with cheats since 2009, because that kind of thing – doing fun stuff with the game – is generally the first thing that gets cut," explains Codemasters' design manager, **Matt Horsman**. "It takes a lot of effort to do fun little cheat codes and stuff, the whole QA side of that. We'd prefer to put bigger features into the game. What would you prefer: Gymkhana in *Dirt 3*, or a hovercar?"

Codemasters is no stranger to the cheats debate. It has, in fact, been well and truly bludgeoned by it over the past few years. One of the first studios to introduce paid-for cheat codes in series such as *Colin McRae Rally* and *LMA Manager*, its forums have seen (and had to delete) plenty of posts in protest. All things considered, it doesn't seem to have been the most successful of endeavours for the company.

As Horsman recalls: "When I joined the company back in 2005, it had already decided to use the bonus code system. So *Colin McRae* had the jelly car and the hovercraft and stuff. They tried to monetise that, did premium phone numbers; it was a policy that every Codemasters game had to have this bonus code system. *Dirt* and *GRID* had various items: No Damage and Speed Boost in *GRID*; the ability to knock cars out of the way. And you could phone up for, like, a pound a minute [to get the codes], or go on to the Codemasters Web site and pay about £2. [The system] disappeared because we basically weren't making much money off of it. People caught on that it was quite expensive. Parents would get annoyed."

Nowadays, Codemasters prefers the no-less-controversial, although apparently more popular, 'convenience cheat' as a paid option. Players of EA's racing games will know it well, as will those of *BlazBlue*, *Magic: The Gathering* and others. Can't be bothered to unlock all the vehicles/cards/hats/whatever? Just pay a few more quid and this content, which you've already bought, is yours a bit sooner. Again, it's not free for a developer to ensure online integrity and disable Achievements and Trophies, though whether you're paying a fair price is another matter.

The story pretty much ends there for the console gamer. There's no legal issue with charging for cheats that aren't advertised parts of the product, so it's an ethical debate at most. People must vote with their wallets, which isn't to say that boycotting will make the cheats free again – they'll probably just vanish entirely. There will be no such outcome on PC, however, where the code you buy is where the story begins.

The cheating landscape has changed spectacularly on the platform where the 'IDKFA' code (polite version: 'ID keys, firearms and amour'; less polite version: 'I don't know fuck all') gave *Doom* players pretty much everything, and PC gamers one of their favourite memes. The decline of







TOP **Matt Horsman, design manager, Codemasters**
ABOVE **James Cope, a *Crackdown* producer now at Ruffian Games**





traditional cheats has made the cheaters more industrious, while the complexities behind that decline have made the cheats themselves more interesting. Unlocking guns and ammo is one thing, but in a game such as *Mass Effect* – where stats can control the past, present and future of your character and their adventure – the possibilities are cosmic.

Rick 'Gibbed' Lacharite has achieved God-like status among PC gamers for, essentially, merging the concepts of cheating and modding. He's active on the Facepunch and Xentax forums, both of which are hotbeds of game exploits and code-wrangling. His CV includes the save editor and toolset behind almost all *Mass Effect* (and *Mass Effect 2*) modding; the discovery and resurrection of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*'s debug menu, along with an in-game ads remover; and similar game-changers for the notoriously locked-down *Just Cause* and *Far Cry 2*.

"Bending the rules of the game lets me enjoy things in more ways; I like to think the better games have tons of replayability," Lacharite says. "Now, the *Mass Effect 2* save editor was actually born out of an interest in making importable saves with different plot settings from *Mass Effect*, since a lot of people, myself included, no longer had their saves from the first game. All the cool stuff people found by using it, such as Legion's early game dialogue, was a fantastic surprise."

Is it ethical to break the design and start unearthing things developers never meant you to see, though? "I don't see why not," Lacharite responds. "People are playing the game – it's their experience."

Lacharite's methods differ depending on the game, but "typically I dig into the game files to see how things tick and go from there. For actual cheat trainers, etc [see 'Ghosts in the machine'], that involves modifying memory in various ways or hooking game logic. Typically, I don't do that sort of thing myself, since it's like using a rocket launcher to open a door."

Put simply, these kinds of exploits involve researching game data (archives and file formats such as scripts), developing tools to interact with that data, and then observing how the game engine handles the data, particularly when it's modified. "When you know enough about the data, you can modify it in a sane way, and thus put the game in a state it probably expects," Lacharite explains.

"If I'm playing a game, there's a good chance I'm poking at it. To give *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* as an example, I made the no-ads mod within 20 minutes of finishing the download from Steam; I started developing my tools after my first game session."

Perhaps the most surprising thing about Lacharite's work – given its ability to put narrative, assets, game rules and flow in players' hands – is how little it seems to antagonise game makers. Some, such as *Red Faction* and *Saints Row* developer Volition, have even lent him a hand. Meanwhile, his *Human Revolution* patch sits happily on the Eidos Montreal forums and it seems even BioWare tolerates him as long as its users don't ask for support.



This goes some way towards debunking another theory about cheats: that developers are too precious about the fruits of their considerable labour. However, Lacharite does admit that not everyone's "cool" with what he does. Furthermore, when we ask Horsman about the outlawing of talk about *Fuel* exploits on Codemasters' forums – developer Asobo left both the debug and system menus in the game – he speculates: "They were probably just locking posts, so the game wasn't ruined. If someone bought *Fuel* and played it, [Codemasters] don't want them to go in there and unlock everything. That would just ruin their experience of it." The question of who owns that experience deserves its own feature, but woe betide the developer who says it does on an Internet forum.

We ask if Achievements are a factor. *Fuel* was a Games For Windows Live game, after all, and its debug menu makes it easy to add 1,000 points to your Gamerscore with a few mouse clicks. Likewise, *Fallout 3* makes it just as simple through its developer console, which is an integral part of the game's mod support. It's also been suggested that the dreadful difficulty level system in *Hard Reset* (you can't change it back if you drop down to Easy for, say, a badly designed boss battle) is a safeguard against Steam Achievement fraud. If it is, though, then surely you'd also expect the one-hit-kill-enabling damage modifier to be removed from its developer console.

"I don't specifically know if Microsoft would tell us off," says Horsman on leaving Achievements vulnerable. "I don't think they would."

The more you follow Cope's advice and look at cheats on a game-by-game basis, the more you realise that there is no conspiracy. Or if there is, it's such a badly coordinated and enforced one – and so impotent in the open world of PC gaming – that developers would have to be mad to take it seriously. The amount of DLC that purely offers advantage isn't that high, and there's little correlation between the more egregious DRM on PC and the games offering such wares.

More compellingly, there's also, as you're about to discover, very little animosity towards the biggest of all developments in modern cheating: the rise of the subscription-based cheat industry. The trainers Lacharite described are so ubiquitous among PC games today that companies in the vein of Cheat Happens (interviewed on the facing page) can all but promise them almost as soon as the games arrive themselves. If cheats are in trouble on PC, someone clearly hasn't told them.

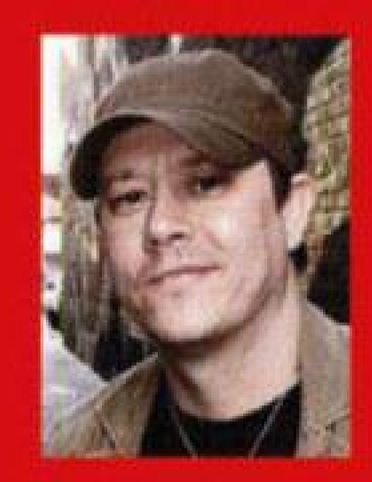
And the future? So long as there are game files on your hard drive, cheats on PC are here to stay. The more interesting question is whether console gamers can demand them to the point of officially restoring them, or whether that Gamerscore culture has poisoned them against it. When a poll was raised on the Codemasters forums, 34 per cent of respondents argued in favour of paying for cheats, but some used the thread to denounce cheating entirely. Those gamers have a new code, it seems – one that doesn't begin up, up, down, down... ■

GHOSTS IN THE MACHINE

PC cheating has gone from lazy Web site fodder to an industry with sophisticated tools. Meet its chairmen



heat Happens offers cheats for a price that many are happy to pay. Its trainers are the type that patch a game in memory, sitting on your desktop and activating cheats via hotkeys. Search Google for such things and you enter the sprawling grey market that fills the void left by official exploits, full of scams, trojans and click-through merchants. Cheat Happens is different, though, as co-founders **Chris O'Rorke** and **Mike Yurgalavage** explain.





FROM TOP **Mike Yurgalavage founded Cheat Happens with Chris O'Rorke**

What does it take to build a game trainer nowadays?

Mike Yurgalavage The modern trainer maker has to fill two roles: programmer and problem solver. Also, eventually, they're going to have to get some background in assembly language, since most of the time that's the native language of the program running in memory, and we're trying to modify that executable while it's running. What's becoming more of a challenge is the problem-solving part of the process.

First, you install the game and get a feel for what's in it, and what useful modifications can be done. Does the game have health? Bullets? Experience? Is it more of a resource-type game where you need gold? For racing games, would slowing the AI cars down be useful? Then the fun begins.

What kind of problems do you need to solve?

MY Games are becoming harder and harder to make trainers for. For instance, the value of the gold might be stored in an encrypted form, which is harder to search for. The code controlling the viewing of the gold might not be compiled until you need to view it, which means that the code is created in nonspecific memory, which is harder to locate and bypass. Many games do scans of themselves to see if their own code has been manipulated, and then crash or cancel the value out to zero or some other such event. Some games load and store data online, where it can't be modified in a normal way. Some games are created via specific engines, such as Unity 3D, and these are basically script-driven games, which aren't normal executables in that the game variables are run through the same few functions, making it nearly impossible to differentiate them.



What separates your trainers from the average ones?

MY A lot can be done with just a memory searcher and some logical thinking. Creating the actual trainer with pop-up instructions and nice graphics, though, and all those things that give it more of a professional appearance and function… those are going to require more of a structured and knowledgeable background. Creating a trainer for games such as *Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine* requires trainer makers who have the ability to overcome a *lot* of problems. There aren't many who can deal with games like this while leaving the games totally in original form, especially not in a timely manner.



Games like that are loaded down with all sorts of protections and anti-piracy code, which we totally understand and agree with, as well as encrypted values and shared functions. However, that sort of thing wreaks havoc with the tools and software we use to make the game trainers. I don't think the developers put all those things in there to stop trainer makers. It's mostly there to stop piracy and blatant online cheating among multiplayer matches and the like. The process of searching for the values and packaging the trainer is the simple part.





Have you noticed a decline in official cheats within games?

MY I'm looking at my stockpile of trainer notes and I have over 1,200 different games that I've worked on, creating trainers for them. The vast majority of these had no cheats or game modification features at all. The trend, if there is one, certainly isn't to make more games with more cheats, that's for sure.

Have you had any dealings with developers over trainers?

Chris O'Rorke I've received a handful of comments from game developers and publishers over the years, and some are regulars on our message boards. All of the comments were overwhelmingly positive. They understand that we simply want to help people get more life out of their games and, in some instances, help people finish games they'd have otherwise put down out of frustration. Our software poses no threat to the online communities or multiplayer environment, doesn't bypass copy protection, etc. I've never received a single complaint from a game publisher or developer in the almost ten years that Cheat Happens has been online.

MY We simply won't work on multiplayer-only game titles. There's no reason for us to try to mess with a title such as *World Of Warcraft*, though there are *many* things that could be done… And, lastly, we support and condone developers using PunkBuster, VAC and those sorts of things that are activated when players are online and in multiplayer environments. We sternly warn users of our software to stay away from multiplayer environments – they're just asking for trouble.

Frankly, we would pull the software or modify it if we were contacted and were shown that it was becoming an issue for a multiplayer-based game. For *Starcraft II*, we built in a kill switch that would disable every trainer we created for that title if necessary, but it was never needed. So even Blizzard, one of the most proactive in taking on 'game modifications', hasn't raised any concerns with us.



REVIEWS. INTERVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Zelda: Four Swords 3DS, DSi
Link's other 25th anniversary gift this month, *Four Swords'* perfect blend of co-operation and competition is as potent as we remember. The jubilation following the co-ordinated defeat of a boss is more than matched by the mad dash for rupees that follows. And the way one **Edge** staffer managed to turn Link's magnetic gloves into the most savagely irritating griefing tool imaginable? Genius.

Triple Town Facebook
The mechanics of a match-three puzzler applied to an RTS, *Triple Town* is a freemium Facebook game that never feels oppressive. A genre mash-up that has you planting grass and killing off rogue bears then matching up their graves to erect churches. Need we say more?

Jetpack Joyride iOS
Fruit Ninja developer Halfbrick takes the one-tap simplicity of distance-running game *Canabalt* and bends the sidescrolling formula into one of the most consistently engaging games to hit the iOS platform. Each play begins with your character Barry Steakfries crashing through the wall of a top-secret laboratory and stealing a jetpack prototype. *Joyride* handles the gradually accelerating forward momentum; you simply ignite the jetpack's burners with repeated taps, sailing over and under onrushing obstacles to log as much forward progress as you can before dying. Sublimely replayable.

bit.ly/it2QiG
Up-to-the-minute reviews and previews

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

Bonus content giveth, and bonus content taketh away

Considering *Batman: Arkham City*? You should be. But if you didn't preorder, you've already missed out. Ordering from Amazon would have nabbed you Batman's Earth-One costume as a bonus. Had you done so at ShopTo, a '70s Batman skin would now be yours. Meanwhile, Gamestop offered a Batman Beyond outfit, while those who bought from Game and Gamestation are currently enjoying Robin as a bonus challenge room character. You'd have needed an income the size of Bruce Wayne's to nab the lot.

You're not supposed to have it all, of course, but preorder bonuses work by tapping into gamers' completionist instinct. Once upon a time they rewarded it, but now they leave it frustratingly unfulfilled.

Those who preordered *Rage* received a copy of the Anarchy edition, a more straightforward proposition that gives you access to items including a double-barrelled shotgun and an extra buggy. It also contains, more worryingly, the Crimson Elite armour. Early on, *Rage* asks you to pick an outfit-themed perk – a defence bonus, trading discount, or upgrade to manufactured items. The Crimson Elite armour gives you all three. We've reached the point, in other words, where a 'bonus' subverts a game's design.

It makes you grateful for the self-contained worlds of *Skyward Sword* and *Dark Souls*, in which every item has a place and a function. There's nothing missing, or extraneous, in either. The locked doors of Hyrule and Lordran might tease and tantalise, but you can be sure the secret to unlocking them lies within the game, not in the entering of a special code. DLC lets worlds change in front of our eyes, but these titles understand the magic of walking, sword in hand, into a world that feels complete at the outset.

The Legend Of Zelda: Skyward Sword

Publisher Nintendo
Developer In-house
Format Wii
Release November 18

Pity the Deku Baba, Hyrule's answer to the Venus Flytrap. Encountered early in the majority of 3D *Zeldas*, it has become a guinea pig for Nintendo's keenest innovators. Slicing its stalk in *Ocarina Of Time* proved Nintendo's Z-targeting had successfully tamed the wild frontier of 3D thirdperson combat. Thirteen years later, cold steel cleaves its head right along a slobbering jawline and you learn – with a slowly widening grin – that Nintendo has repeated the trick with motion controls. We'd salute the troubled flora if it wouldn't result in Link chopping his own ear off. Such are the risks of one-to-one motion tracking.

Link's blade mimics every nuance of the wrist. It points as you sound the charge, rises above the head in Braveheart defiance or rotates in the hand for quiet observation. Fidelity invites theatricality; pointing at Bokoblins in the order Link's going to gut them is a meaningless gesture, but one loaded with samurai cool. In combat, which needs samurai *skill*, Nintendo weighs the fantasy of one-to-one freedom against its strict standards of usability. Too far one way and you've got *Twilight Princess'* humourless Remote shaking; too far the other, and *Trespasser*'s flailing hands come to mind. Nintendo hits the sweet spot by massaging directional swipes into preset horizontal, vertical and diagonal attacks.

In the wake of the one-to-one tomfoolery, limiting actual cuts to eight compass points may sound robotic. In action, it is nothing short of revelatory. MotionPlus ably registers your play-acting – its unfaltering fidelity never once let us down – which *Skyward Sword* translates into the clean strikes you imagine. Delivering a deathblow with an opportune swipe is roleplaying of the purest kind, Link's hand and yours outstretched in unison as a three-necked beast writhes on the floor. This is not the first time Link has lopped tentacles left, right and centre, but it is the first time hands have been left, right and centre with him. The victories are ours in a way they could never be with a traditional controller.

Freed from the shackles of buttons, Nintendo's monster designers concoct a giddying bestiary of revamped favourites and startling debuts. Gelatinous blobs must be vigorously diced before they regroup, Stalfos dual-wield (and occasionally quadruple-wield) for added defence, and Lizalfos hide vulnerable bellies behind Hellboy-ish stone gauntlets. One striking industrial region hosts security drones whose glowing hinges beckon like dotted 'cut here' lines. No parental guidance is required, though younger adventurers may find it offered, if not enforced. The fact that one reoccurring boss boasts no greater gimmick than quick reflexes shows how far *Skyward Sword* has moved beyond earlier games.

MotionPlus permeates Link's kitbag from items to interface. A simple thing like bombs differentiating between underarm bowls and overarm lobs rejuvenates an item long thought exhausted. Projectile weapons demonstrate a true breakthrough, rejecting Wii's sensor bar for purely gyroscopic aiming. Tilting the Remote grants control finesse to rival *Metroid Prime 3*, untainted by the jitteriness of a hand held aloft. Comparing gliding archery here to *Twilight Princess'* flighty bow cursor, we wonder why Nintendo didn't pursue this avenue of control to begin with. The technology powers all in-game menus, picking between dialogue choices or navigating item wheels with the smoothest of gestures.

Flying high and disembarking into a tunic-rippling freefall is both totally unnecessary and absolutely essential



Since the ill-starred *Skyward Sword* E3 reveal, a din of control concerns drowned the dialogue around the game. As satiated dissenters descend into a revered hush they will discover what simmers beneath: this is a radical departure for *Zelda*. Before a sword even enters his hand we've met a uniquely athletic Link. A stamina meter governs climbing and dashing, turning steep inclines and vine-clad cliffs into nervous clambers between ledges and restorative fruits. Regions built around volcano ascents and sucking quicksand help rediscover a platforming challenge diminished in *Zelda* since the addition of auto jump.

And what a strange overworld to dash about in. Skyloft is over the world, yes, but the cloudy realm acts more as a hub to regions below. Imagine a halfway house between *Majora*'s Clock Town and *Wind Waker*'s ocean: a community of oddballs scattered across a sky archipelago. Considerably smaller than the sea, it makes up for it in a density of character. Islands hide bug collectors, sword enthusiasts and deranged clowns, many with minigames and most feeding into an overarching side-quest to rival *Ocarina*'s Skulltula hunt. And Skyloft's small area is remedied in volume – flying high and disembarking into a tunic-rippling freefall is both totally unnecessary and absolutely essential.

Diving below reveals further rebellion against the old ways. Three self-contained regions – forest, volcano and desert – reject the conventional field/dungeon cycle by dragging *Zelda*'s legendary temple architects into the light. Before even reaching a dungeon's doors Link is riding monster corpses across deadly sands, excavating keys from pillars of dirt and shuffling up vines in search of a tribe of paranoid birds. A newfound sense of purpose arises largely thanks to Link's dowsing ability. Following a bleeping sword places clear objectives in the adventurous sprawl, imposing the artificial boundaries in which *Zelda*'s locked-room-puzzle mentality can flourish.

As for those puzzles? How's this for a statement of intent: not a single torch-lighting number, and only one push-the-box-on-the-button incident. How does it have the nerve to call itself a celebration of 25 years of *Zelda*? Blame Link's unusual toys. A flying beetle pulls



ABOVE What *Skyward Sword* lacks in chickens to torture (Link torments cats instead), it makes up for in wonderfully reactive spider webs. Cut strands and they tear and sag in a convincing manner. **LEFT** Despite their tighter confines, the skies still evoke pangs of pioneering pride as dots on the horizon emerge as puzzling gauntlets or, indeed, giant drums

BELOW Silent Realm challenges are unbearably tense. The fruit Link collects are the only way to hold back enemies, so the further the challenge goes, the fewer defensive options are open



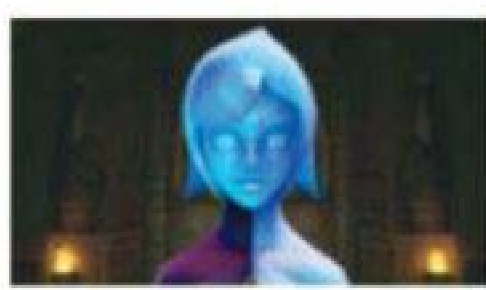
Knocking enemies to the floor opens them up for a finishing blow. It's one of the game's rare moments of generalised Remote flicking, but Link performs his moves with enough acrobatic gusto for us to forgive it



players up into the rafters as digging claws bury deep into foundations. Add other tools that blow, yank, glide and drag, and designers have a juicy verb sheet with which to concoct fiendish head-scratchers. Where *Twilight Princess'* gizmos gathered dust after glorious debut dungeons, *Skyward Sword* keeps its kitbag tight and in constant circulation with ingenious multitasking and surprise upgrades along the way.

A new user-led upgrade system, on the other hand, strikes *Skyward Sword*'s single dull note. Resembling a *My First Monster Hunter*, globs of goo and ornamental skulls are swapped for tougher shields, bigger ammo pouches and deadlier arrows. Scooping insects with a butterfly net lets you supercharge potions, too. But such avenues jar with an adventure balanced for the base items. Odds don't need swinging in Link's favour; they're just right. If Nintendo had *Zelda* virgins in mind – with the upgrades as edge softeners – it seems strange to bury advantages in a collectibles system that speaks loudest to obsessive old hands. That said, the idea gains traction once the end credits have rolled.

Having broken moulds, *Skyward Sword* refuses to set others. No two hours are the same. Pirate ship chases become mine-cart rollercoasters become stronghold raids all in the course of one afternoon. Elsewhere, in a beautiful nod to *Zelda*'s dual-world tradition, one new gimmick causes two worlds to collide in a single space. When later acts see entire regions double back on themselves – either reinvented as terrifying stealth scrambles or disrupted by ill-tempered deities – you wonder if Nintendo has found the secret to infinite level design. Cézanne inspired the style, but it's Magic Eye stereograms these levels within levels most resemble.



21ST CENTURY GIRL

Fi lives in the hilt of Link's sword, popping out to offer the usual companion services: enemy analysis and puzzle hints interwoven with a healthy dose of snark. The sprite-like creature takes great pleasure in calculating Link's grim odds of survival, boiling down scenarios to cold statistics in a manner befitting Samus Aran's scanning visor. The game follows her enjoyably daft sci-fi lead with an adventure laced with mining facilities and antique automatons. But her rationality only serves to emphasise moments of magic when they do occur, as forgotten memos from a goddess bubble up in poetic moments of song and dance. And she carries a better tune than *Twilight Princess'* caterwauling wolves.

***Skyward Sword*'s 35 hours see MotionPlus get a proper workout. It teeters across tightropes, steers a cart, flaps wings, plucks at harp strings, shimmies along ledges and even helps Link do a bit of spring cleaning**

Unsurprisingly for a game with a key mechanic that involves flinging Link into tumbling freefall, a glint of matinee idol derring-do is never far from its eye. Its 35 hours – that's ignoring a wealth of trinkets – fly by in a heroic blur of pirates, dragons and zombie-filled crypts. A reliance on riddles and cranking up ancient machines finds its treasure-hunting roots not in *Wind Waker*, but Indiana Jones. As cracked tablets lead to forgotten sanctums and mystic hymns stir memories in Link's otherworldly aide (see '21st century girl'), the hairs on the back of the neck bristle to salute a quest unique in its unabashed lack of irony. This is a game made for Christmas Day, released an agonising six weeks before.

Nintendo has been so busy elaborating on *Ocarina*'s heroic ideal that it's forgotten to embrace it for itself. So what better way to honour 25 years of bravery than courageously striving for something new? And what opportune hardware to cut those ties. After all, hasn't the Wii hardware spent the past five years searching for the hero inside itself? Firstparty experiments have tested Wii's boundaries, deducing what does and doesn't work. Their findings resonate throughout *Skyward Sword*. In *Wii Sports*-powered bomb bowling. In skydiving and swordplay learnt on a Wuhu holiday. In the surreal beauty and orchestral bombast beamed down from *Super Mario Galaxy*. In the metallic *Metroid* chu-chunk of a door lock. Even the opinion-dividing *Wii Music* is vindicated in subtle moments of auto-tuning cleverness. How apt that this ultimate tale of hero-making should see Nintendo's hardware become the console it was always meant to be.

10

Post Script

Build it and Link will come: exploring – and re-exploring – *Skyward Sword*'s field of dreams

Exploring Hyrules of old, you can wonder what exactly Link is fighting for. On the surface these are games obsessed with their lands: Ganondorf wants it, legends mythologise it, and shopkeepers assure you their wares are the finest in all of it. Stepping out on to the cherished soil paints a different picture. This is virgin territory, untouched and unloved. Cracks await bombs, chests sit unopened and heart pieces tinkle away on distant ledges. Far from a living, breathing ecosystem, Hyrule is a sealed adventure playground. The lights are on, but no one's home. And the lights are on only because Link lit some torches to open the door.

Obstacle courses such as these are easily exhausted. Once scaled and pillaged for treasure, complex geological formations have served their purpose. Can you name another landmass that gets smaller the farther you explore? For such topographical waste to exist in the same universe as Nintendo's dungeons – the most economic use of floor space this side of Japanese pod hotels – is mystifying. And if *Skyward Sword* is anything to go by, Nintendo feels the same way.

For one, field areas now teem with life. Miyazaki-like owls waddle around Faron Woods, and bequiffed molemen burrow through Eldin Volcano's topsoil. Deep down, these faces are no more sophisticated than the rigid NPCs who lurk like bored teenagers in Hyrule market square. But the illusion of a reactive presence, if only superficially conjured by updated text boxes, is a forwards leap. Nightfall in Skyloft, triggered with a nap, sees off-duty shop staff reveal the comically tragic lives behind their forced grins. Characters have a place and purpose in this world; can you say the same of *Ocarina*'s perpetually giggling brothers?

And as for the matter of suspiciously untouched treasures? A Goron archeologist is on hand to explain that people aren't interested in history. His amazement as Link reveals the importance of artefacts around him more than makes up for the disinterest of his forebears.

More dynamic change arises as dense dungeon design is imported into the field areas. *Skyward Sword*'s producer, **Eiji Aonuma**, tells us how *Twilight Princess* "was beginning to lose the lines between the field area and the dungeon area". He explains that "following this trend, and also taking into consideration the fact that users were starting to get bored of the typical game structure, we made *Skyward Sword* feel like it does not have such boundaries by adding 'dowsing', which allows you to experience dungeon-like gameplay in the field." Thus, the ability to sniff out treasure welcomes the placement of more treasure to begin with.

Dowsing grafts new adventures on to well-trodden ground. At different times Link is homing in on mystical crates (beacons for unlocking chests up in Skyloft), raw ingredients for item upgrades and knick-knacks dropped by clumsy sky people. Where previous *Zelda*s often felt overly prepared, with everything positioned just so for the adventure to begin, dowsing lets Nintendo adjust on the fly. Come the end of the game, with a full dial of dowsing targets, players will be surprised by how much they missed on previous passes. That's passes, plural. While the dowsing rod refocuses the field, narrative events flip them entirely.

Take Faron Woods. An initial visit reveals a traditional *Zelda* field: monsters and platforming, with that slight dowsing twist. Link returns later for a spiritual trial. This time, burying his blade in the ground whisks him to a neon facsimile of the woods, the Silent Realm. His task here is to collect mystical fruit while avoiding one-hit kills from phantom pursuers. The fruit freezes would-be executioners and buys time to reach further pieces. But pools of alarm-raising water cut off Faron Woods' familiar paths, pushing Link to higher ground in a nervy parkour challenge. Memory proves duplicitous, and finds in Nintendo a trickster willing to exploit it.

Nightfall in Skyloft, triggered with a nap, sees off-duty shop staff reveal their comically tragic lives



As a proven architect of happy memories – playing *Ocarina 3D* is like walking the halls of a childhood haunt – Nintendo wisely builds on these foundations. Aonuma highlights the player's ability to "go back to a dungeon you have already explored, with a new mission. Perhaps to find something that was not important before". This, he explains, "brings you the newfound possibility of using your memory and your experience of the dungeon to help you in the challenge". Indeed, entering once-liberated grounds to clash with a new batch of squatters is one of the game's richest pleasures.

A few developments pull off the coup of altering playstyles entirely. Faron Wood's Silent Realm leads to two further iterations. One, a conventional bit of gear-gating, simply opens up parts of the map you never thought of exploring. The second (a surrealist triumph) alters Link's means of navigating the woods. Elsewhere, platforming sections blossom into escort missions and previously conquered heights are reborn as POW camps. One key plot point revolves around a series of ever-evolving boss battles in a single repeating pit.

The desire to cram play styles into a limited space owes a bigger debt to Mario than any previous *Zelda*. The plumber's 2D jaunts make an artform of transformative spaces, where a simple costume change reveals unseen expanses and a trail of red coins carves challenging dares around familiar platforms. There it feeds into Mario's guileless pursuit of joy, here it conjures something more. Only when you know a place inside out does it truly become worth fighting for. ■

Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception

The appeal of the *Uncharted* series hinges on a seductive premise. With modern life tempting us to believe our world has been strip-mined of all its mysteries, imagine if there were still priceless artefacts buried like acorns beneath the topsoil. Potentially in our own back garden, or under the pavement. Imagine if the planet we've spent our lives married to was still capable of surrendering anecdotes we'd never heard. What if you didn't need any special credentials to chase these ancient heirlooms, just bull-headed curiosity, a penchant for throwaway one-liners, and a handful of friends who didn't mind helping you out every time you tumble over a ledge, painfully dislocating a shoulder in the process?

The latest chapter in Naughty Dog's adventure saga has a lofty pedigree to live up to. Its predecessor *Uncharted 2* has sold nearly five million copies and boasts the second-highest aggregated review score of any PS3 title in the console's history behind *GTAIV*. How do you follow up a success of that magnitude? The design logic guiding action sequels would appear to be straightforward: double the size of the explosions, then double them again. And once more just to be safe. But this approach gets problematic when applied to Naughty Dog's storytelling framework. Creative director and writer Amy Hennig has taken great pains to keep *Uncharted* a character-driven epic. How do you appease fans with action set-pieces that feel sufficiently upgraded, without losing the intimacy of characters' personal journeys amidst the resulting spectacle?

One of the great coups of *Uncharted 3* is that Naughty Dog manages to push its action to broader places while illuminating aspects of its hero Nathan Drake that previously felt opaque. The Drake of previous instalments was a likable everyman, historically conversant but inescapably shallow. Sure, he could save the day, get the girl (correction: girls) and crack a joke as deftly as Indiana Jones did a whip. But he could just as often feel like a vacuous narcissist with a taste for looting and third-world killing sprees. The studio's approach to developing its protagonist this time amounts to a quest for a buried treasure that nobody is entirely certain exists to begin with.

Each game's plot has orbited a signature relic, which both figured into the narrative and spun hypnotically in the corner of the screen during loading intervals. It's a telling detail that the third game's equivalent of *Uncharted 2*'s dagger turns out to be a ring that once belonged to Sir Francis Drake. *Uncharted 3* hosts its fair share of gun battles and bloodshed, yet themes of fidelity and commitment muscle their way to the fore repeatedly. The backdrop of violence merely serves as a furnace which repeatedly tests the relationships between Drake and his comrades, most notably his mentor and father figure Victor 'Sully' Sullivan.

Publisher SCE
Developer Naughty Dog
Format PS3
Release November 2

Creative director Amy Hennig has taken great pains to keep Uncharted a character-driven epic



In pursuit of a legendary Arabian city that Sir Francis Drake allegedly discovered and kept secret from his expedition's sponsor, Queen Elizabeth, *Uncharted 3* upholds the series' tradition of blurring the line between history and fiction while whisking players around the globe. From mansion ruins nestled in France's emerald-green countryside or a moonlit stone fortress in Syria, to a ghostly cruise liner that threatens to drag our hero into the ocean depths, *Uncharted 3* refreshes its backdrop with the clockwork dependability of a Nintendo title. Because Naughty Dog's artists invest each setting with such exhaustive detail, you may not even realise you're being treated to the most exquisite fire, desert and sky levels since *Super Mario Bros 3*. The water level delivers the campaign's set-pièce de résistance by floating its cruise ship atop a procedurally generated ocean before tilting 90 degrees in an echo of *Uncharted 2*'s prologue.

As thrilling as the action segments prove, if you're looking for *Uncharted 3* to keep a nonstop dosage of adrenaline flowing into your IV drip, you may grow fidgety at times. Several key sequences in the game, including an early flashback that finds Drake poking around a Colombian museum and trailing a slow-moving target, slacken the game's pace deliberately. *Uncharted 3* builds resonance into these pauses for breath. A late-game meander across sprawling sand dunes takes its precious time resolving, which allows Drake's sense of dislocation to fully take root. Naughty Dog understands the power of dynamic contrast. These artfully sculpted doldrums add emotional depth and render the game's high-flying action moments that much more transcendent. You can't have a line of poetry without some unstressed syllables, after all, and there is indeed poetry in *Uncharted 3*. Actual poetry, in fact: one scene weaves a narrated stanza of TS Eliot's The Waste Land into your gameplay objective onscreen.

But while the word 'poetic' isn't likely to appear on the game's promotional material, you can bet 'cinematic' will. *Uncharted 3*'s ambitions on this front prove once again to be a blessing and a curse. Because Naughty Dog has grown so accomplished at interactive set-pieces, you seldom find your control of Drake wrested away, even at the game's most climactic beats. Gameplay and the connective ligaments of each cutscene blend together so seamlessly you no longer feel the see-sawing pivot back and forth. The problem the studio still hasn't figured out how to resolve, however, involves the flow disruption of a 'bad actor'. Early in the game we find ourselves being chased across rooftops by thugs. Inevitably, in the panic of being pursued, we occasionally misjudge a leap and fall to our death. The chase resets at a recent checkpoint and we try again. After a handful of these restarts, the intended filmic



ABOVE This outing leaves the jungles of previous games behind in favour of a chateau nestled in a French forest. Every time you inch around a cliff face, expect a gorgeous vista to greet you. LEFT You seldom lose the ability to control Drake's movement, even in situations as climactic as this one of him being dragged through the air behind a cargo plane

BELOW Night levels such as this airstrip scene shift the colour palette to a soothing indigo hue. Don't expect to board this plane in a traditional fashion, however



Despite the campaign being singleplayer-only, Drake's friends offer the AI version of co-op play. To accent the James Bond feel of this prologue scene, Drake and Sully find themselves fighting thugs in a London pub

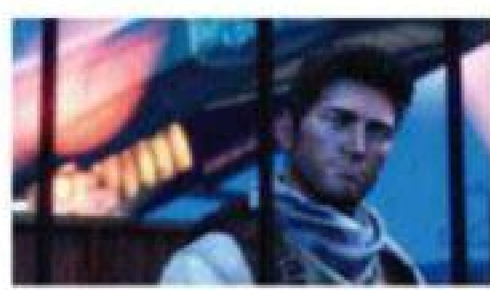


thrill of the sequence fizzles to tedium. Each game-over audio cue feels like an unseen director yelling "cut!" Each checkpoint restart: "aaand... *action!*" followed by yet another exasperated "cut!"

Combat once again provides a more nimble take on *Gears Of War*'s formula, only with richer verticality due to Drake's agility. Bad guys lack visual personality, but Naughty Dog makes up for this by implementing some devious AI. When you have enemies flanking you constantly, vigilance and movement become just as important as the gun in your hand. The game's more expansive combat bowls provide a panoply of methods through which to navigate the space. One fight plays out in a harbour full of boats sloshing at anchor, creating a breathless mix of shooting, cacophony-muting plunges beneath the water's surface to avoid gunfire, and pulling yourself up into boats to engage hostiles.

The updated fisticuffs mechanic, however, never fully sheds its QTE taint. Time slows momentarily when your assailant readies an attack. Hit triangle when you see the button prompt to dodge! You're caught in a chokehold – hammer circle repeatedly with the button prompt! With multiple combatants, getting mired in a fistfight feels like being cornered by a chatty neighbour while urgently trying to get somewhere. You'll pine for the days when you could just deliver a gun muzzle uppercut and shift focus to the next threat.

For players who like the opponents they wipe out to be capable of feeling actual humiliation, *Uncharted 3*'s multiplayer modes lay out a gluttonous buffet. There's a genuine narrative structure, and maps increase the dynamism of traditional arena-style multiplayer with quick-traversal options such as zip lines. The London Underground map begins with teams occupying two



CLASS ACTING

While *LA Noire* relied upon detailed facial capture to help unpack characters' inner lives, Naughty Dog's approach – capturing its actors' voiceover and physical performances in tandem – means that characters' gestures in *Uncharted 3* pack more expressive power. During a scene in which a female friend of Drake's bids him a pained farewell through a barred fence, she nervously pats his hand several times through the bars before turning to leave. Though you've seen this type of scene in summer blockbusters a million times, your throat constricts at the desperation in the actor's body language.

Although Drake has weathered seemingly impossible odds in the past, being marooned in the largest desert on Earth will test his skills and endurance levels like nothing else (see Post Script on facing page)

trains hurtling down the tracks beside each other. Shooting through the windows or leaping across, the resulting showdown feels like a naval skirmish from Pirates Of The Caribbean. A few minutes later the trains come to a halt and the fight spills into a station. Hitting square to respawn near a teammate puts the group back in Team Deathmatch, encouraging co-operation over potentially disastrous lone-wolf heroics.

A standalone co-op adventure mode that supports up to three players feels lacklustre in comparison to the singleplayer campaign, especially a Borneo jungle stage that might as well be an orphaned chunk of level design from a previous *Uncharted*. There's fun to be had, but the constraints of accommodating multiple perspectives undermines the cinematic spectacle (especially in splitscreen) on which *Uncharted* relies and pervades every sumptuous corner of the singleplayer adventure.

That adventure remains the jewel in *Uncharted 3*'s crown. Every time the game confronts you with another gilded, millennia-old piece of architecture, the same thought occurs: how could a primitive civilisation build something so immense, so confoundingly ornate? The present console cycle is expected to last nearly a decade, and there will inevitably be developers advocating the need for more sophisticated tools. But just like Machu Picchu, the Pyramids and every other engineering marvel of antiquity, *Uncharted 3* will stand as a reminder to future generations of gamers that enough problem-solving imagination can turn any old trowel into a magic wand.

9

Post Script

Uncharted 3's 'lost in the desert' sequence buries the action-blockbuster playbook

Warning: this section discusses set-pieces from the latter half of the game, and as such features spoilers.

Can God create a rock so big that He can't lift it? For centuries philosophers have needled theologians by raising this omnipotence paradox. Toward the end of *Uncharted 3*, when a plane crash maroons our hero deep in the Rub' al Khali desert, Naughty Dog seems to turn on itself a gun loaded with this sort of conundrum. Can the studio – the undisputed ruler of the cinematic action genre – create a game so nitrous-charged, so bulletproof, that it can't even kill its momentum with ten minutes of Drake stumbling about lost in a sea of monochrome?

Of course this question is specious. For one thing, it assumes players will have no interest in waiting around long enough to find out if their beloved hero lives or dies. When in actuality you sense in the moment that Drake's very life depends on your left thumb leaning into that analogue stick, nudging him closer to rescue, or water, or whatever might be next. That monochrome desert isn't so unremarkable either. The Rub' al Khali's mountainous sand dunes with their finely etched ridges and smoothly sloping faces are nothing short of majestic to behold. Plus, we've never seen Drake so completely overwhelmed by a situation that he couldn't defuse its life-or-death tension with a joke. Apparently it takes a 650,000-square-kilometre desert to get Drake to concede that the glass is officially empty.

Uncharted 3's desert wander offers a powerful corrective to other developers making big-budget action games. The time spent traversing a hallway connecting two firefights hardly falls under the banner of dynamic contrast. Sometimes you need to find new ways to communicate that don't feel like the all-caps litany of shooting, grenading and taunt-barking. After *Uncharted 3*'s mid-air plane explosion and narrow escape aboard a parachute-equipped cargo crate jams an adrenaline shot into our chest cavity, we're treated to the most blissfully serene quiet imaginable. Even the bucking vibration of the controller's rumble has gone still in our hands. Then we land in the desert. Then we start walking out into the dunes. Into nowhere.

The interaction between game designer and player forms a conversation. The game designer speaks to the player by introducing gameplay stimuli. The player responds to the designer by interpreting those elements and conveying what they intend to do with the agency provided. In tightly scripted, story-driven games such as *Uncharted 3*, it's easy to resent the game for monopolising the conversation, for having so little apparent interest in hearing what players have to say. In the case of the *Uncharted* series, however, most of us are perfectly willing to let Naughty Dog talk over us because its designers always seem to have something interesting to relate.

We journey with Drake. We peek over his shoulder. We watch how he moves and reacts. We are not Drake.



Drake's trek through the desert is certainly scripted. Though you're able to steer the direction of his movements, the game funnels you toward a specific point, or provides a narrow area in which to manoeuvre. Still, there's something incredibly intimate about the slow, methodical way this sequence plays out. And something lonely. To stretch the conversation metaphor a bit further, the desert sequence in *Uncharted 3* feels like Naughty Dog going quiet. Be it through the advice of Drake's allies, the flashing up of button prompts during fistfights, or the scrawled hints in Drake's notebook, *Uncharted* is a series better than most at telling the player what to do. The desert sequence takes that guiding hand away, and threatens to leave the player as lost as Drake.

The intimacy of the sequence catches us off guard. It's really the first time we've had any extended quality alone time with Drake since the series began. His friends are always hanging about. Or there are enemies to mop up. Because *Uncharted 3* is a thirdperson shooter, we have a different sort of relationship with our avatar. Drake has his own voice. He's not a silent vessel we're meant to possess like some poltergeist. We don't feel like we're controlling him so much as urging him. The relationship with a thirdperson avatar is one of companionship. We journey with him. We peek over his shoulder. We watch how he moves and reacts to the world. We are not Drake any more than we are Marcus Fenix while playing *Gears*, or Solid Snake while playing *Metal Gear*. And we learn more about Drake during our several-minute wander together in the desert than we have in the entire time we've known him.

We learn that Drake is human. Stop pushing him forward and he collapses to the ground. He may display superheroic resilience at times, but we're reminded that he has the potential for frailty. The camera pulls back and we see how tiny Drake is against all that desert. Wandering in circles chasing mirages, Drake believes he is going to die. And the apparition his mind conjures is not some girl he's made flirty eyes with in past games, but the man who became his mentor, father and cohort. Drake gazes up at the stars on his first night in the dunes and tries to find the pole star to guide his direction through the desert. Without the crutch of Sully's naval expertise, he's got no clue. Naughty Dog understands that heroes need weaknesses to overcome. Even when its action-blockbuster seems to have irreparably lost its way, Naughty Dog's storytellers know exactly which way is north. ■

Batman: Arkham City

Publisher Warner Bros
Developer Rocksteady Studios
Format 360 (version tested), PC, PS3
Release Out now

More than most superheroes, Batman is defined by his limits. And so was *Arkham Asylum*. In taking the Dark Knight out of Gotham, Rocksteady didn't fulfil players' keenest Batman fantasy – that of swooping over a corrupted city before diving to earth to dispense vigilante justice. What we got in return, however, was a Batman so flawlessly attuned to his environment that it was hard to imagine him out of it. A terrifying blend of gymnast and wrestler, Batman's picking off, one by one, of the Joker's quaking minions in the game's stealth-themed rooms was an exercise in utter dominance of a tightly controlled space. His utility belt, meanwhile, bristled with a set of tools tailor-made for negotiating the asylum's *Metroid*-structured interiors and occasional open areas.

But after its introduction, *Arkham City* places you on the highest floor of a skyscraper, with a city at your feet. The effect is very nearly disorienting, if only for the sumptuous level of detail on offer. The wintry Arkham City is a carved-up and cut-off hunk of Gotham, a glorious mix of neon and sodium, rusted metal, soot and black stone. And the structure you're standing on, by the way, is the Ace Chemicals building: the place where a no-name hoodlum fell into a vat of chemicals and the Joker emerged. Your first objective, meanwhile, is the district courthouse where Harvey Dent was cruelly disfigured and became Two-Face. And a little distance away, as the bat flies, is the alleyway where a young Bruce Wayne watched as his mother and father were murdered.

Just as *Asylum*'s madhouse setting allowed Rocksteady to bring a host of Batman's villains together in a relatively confined space (a trick repeated here), *Arkham City* has allowed the studio to pick and choose landmarks from Gotham's history in the creation of its environment. This is a city in which every street corner feels lovingly authored, visually unique and dripping with DC lore, trumping *Asylum* for detail and character despite the increased scale.

Two simple tweaks to Batman's controls make that scale easily navigable. The first is an early upgrade to his grappling hook that lets you fling Batman into the air rather than pull him on to a surface. The second is a dive-bomb manoeuvre that can be used to gain height and speed. Just as *Arkham Asylum*'s combat captured Batman's devastating elegance in a scrum, *Arkham City*'s flight controls offer a graceful, exhilarating freedom, tempered by just the right skill requirement to ensure that taking to the skies is always engaging.

In breaking out of the madhouse, *Arkham City* has also broken up the first game's labyrinthine, *Metroid*- and *Castlevania*-inspired level design. Arkham City is a less interconnected place than the asylum, with interiors that, especially in its opening hours, feel smaller and more boxed-off from one another. This has a knock-on effect on the game's pacing. Whereas *Asylum* was a giant level through which Rocksteady could predict a player's path, drip-feeding set-pieces and diversions as needed, *Arkham City* is a series of isolated set-pieces you swoop between at your own pace.

This is a city in which every street corner feels lovingly authored, visually unique and dripping with DC lore

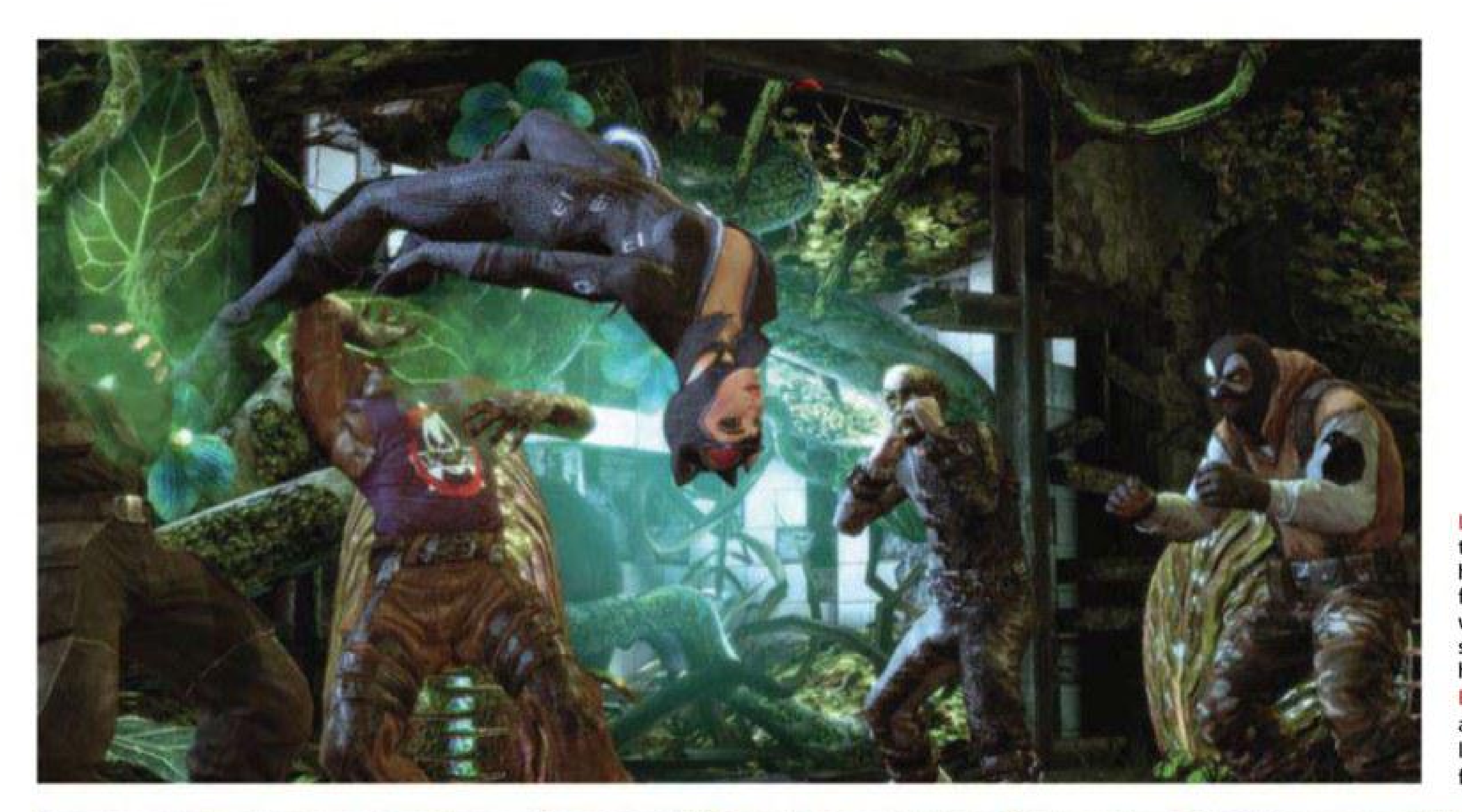


Eventually, however, the interiors begin to resemble meatier chunks of the first game. A chilly museum taken over by *Arkham City*'s vicious cockney gangster of a Penguin is a highlight, every exhibit containing a relic of his defeated foes (with gloating narration provided by the squat villain himself, of course). And a journey beneath the city surface is an archaeological expedition beginning in abandoned subway tunnels and culminating in a rather unexpected find. Objectives crisscross the map, encouraging you to stumble across the many sidequests placed en route. These include ringing phones that send you rushing across the city before Victor Zsasz claims another victim, political prisoners that need protecting from Arkham's less innocent inmates, and the Riddler's protracted game of cat-and-mouse across the breadth of the city.

The core of the game – the three pillars of stealthy predation, combat and exploration – remains unchanged. Of those pillars, it's combat that bears most of *Arkham City*'s weight. The elegant, flowing system of *Arkham Asylum* has been retained, with a few additions. It's easier to weave Batman's gadgets into combos, for a start, and a handful of new enemy types have emerged, including knife-wielding foes requiring a series of timed dodges to avoid. Enemies with guns still need to be taken on more cautiously – and have learned to counter your advantages. Henchmen wearing thermal scanners can pick out a crafty Caped Crusader hidden above them, whereas others wear a signal jammer that renders your X-ray detective vision useless. The need to swoop in and take out these individuals quickly impinges on your ability to skulk around the edges of rooms, picking off stragglers at leisure.

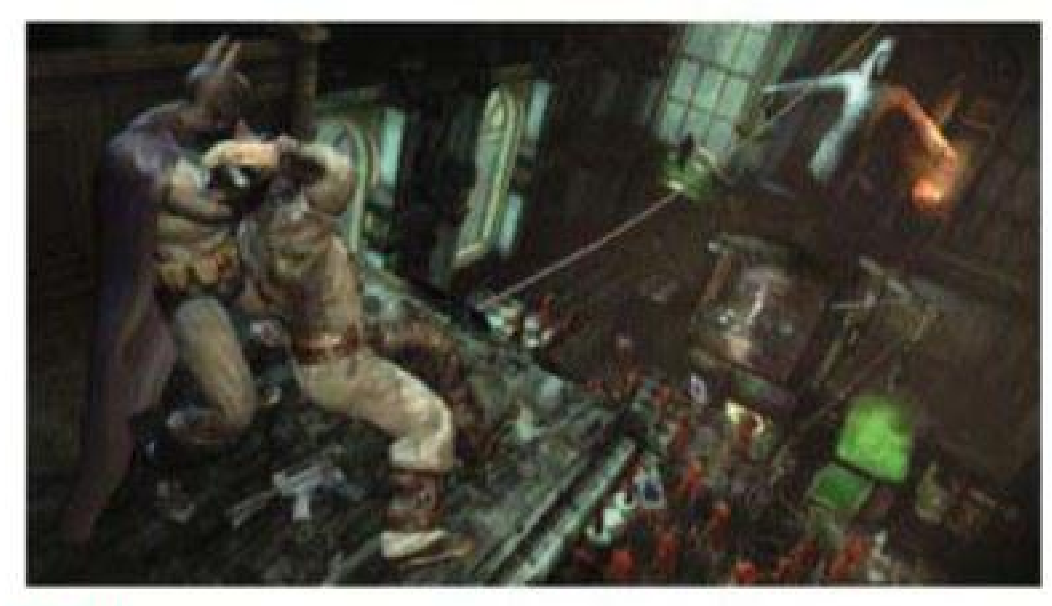
And the bosses are vastly improved. The first game's habit of pitting you against a steroidal, hulking brute hasn't been entirely broken, but these duels are interspersed with encounters truer to the nature of the supervillains you're facing than the finale of *Asylum* ever was. One fight, towards the middle of the game, deftly enforces you to think creatively about the full potential of your inventory, while another continues to mine the surrealist vein the Scarecrow sections of the first game introduced.

If much of *Arkham City* is iterative, cautiously upgrading systems that were more than fit for purpose first time around, then Catwoman is a more disruptive presence. Quick, lithe and outrageously sexualised (she often seems to be flirting with herself), she plays similarly to Batman yet feels nothing like him. Where



LEFT Each villain has appropriately themed goons. Two-Face's minions have scarred their own faces too, for instance, whereas the Joker's wear clown masks. Poison Ivy's support staff, however, as seen here, are simply brainwashed.
BELOW Arkham City is mostly slums and industrial quarters. It's not as large as it seems – a skilled enough flier can traverse it in two minutes





RIGHT Technically, Batman never kills anyone, though some of *Arkham City*'s bad guys do end up on the receiving end of one hell of a beating, while others are simply left dangling off the edge of skyscraper rooftops

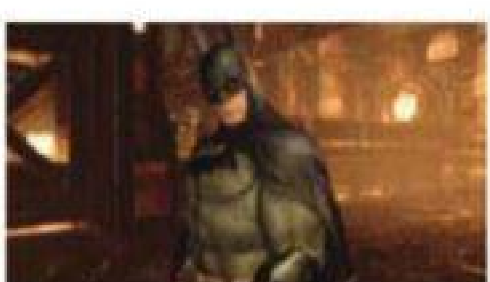


Items available for use in combat include batarangs and the batclaw. Explosive gel, meanwhile, can now be placed on the ground mid-combo and detonated once a suitably large group of baddies presents itself

Batman looks down on Arkham City from the air, she slinks and leaps across its rooftops, her whip pulling her towards vertical surfaces which must be crawled up with a few extra taps of the shoulder button. And while her combat skills are based on the same template, her counters and takedown animations exude a very different personality. She can use Batman's perches in stealth sections, but is better suited to crawling upside down across the ceiling. She's proof of the flexibility of Rocksteady's mechanics (given, at least, a suitably human hero), and that no developer is better at capturing comic book powers in-game.

Indeed, Catwoman is so fully fleshed-out that her slight presence in the game comes as a disappointment. Her few chapters are distributed unevenly across the adventure, and she's such an effective palate cleanser you wish you could see more of her. She's not the only character to feel underutilised in *Arkham City*, either. The game's premise, which sees different parts of the city claimed by supervillains vying for both power and screen time, lends Rocksteady's environmental artists a chance to give each section of the prison city a distinct personality, but comes at the expense of the intensity of the Joker-Batman dynamic offered in the previous game. Hugo Strange, the new warden of Arkham and the game's nominal primary antagonist, is a particular casualty of the packed rogues gallery, reduced to a background presence for much of the game.

But around the point that Strange's plans are revealed, Rocksteady cashes in on the open-world setting in a big way. Events spill out from interiors into the city itself in a manner only hinted at by the chases and search-and-destroy missions early on, leading into a series of – literally – escalating set-pieces. The stakes are raised considerably, and it's hard not to be caught up in the final act's breathless pace. The asylum setting has its advantages, but dramatic scale isn't one of them.



ELEMENTARY

If there's one aspect of the character Rocksteady has struggled to capture, it's Batman's claim to be the world's greatest detective. 'Detection' in *Arkham City* is based around the same mix of scanning objects and following trails as before, though it's admittedly harder to keep track of drops of splattered blood outside of the asylum's narrow corridors, and tracking bullet trajectories does take advantage of the outside world's extra vertical space. Nonetheless, if there's one part of the *Arkham* series that could be built on in any future instalments, it's this.

There's a wealth of content here once the drama's over, too. Wrapping up sidequests and Riddler collectibles could easily take hours, though it's fair to say that tracking down every last trinket is slightly less fun in a large, open environment. The challenge rooms, however, are an even greater diversion than before, thanks to Catwoman providing a second distinct moveset to master. As well as the combat and predator challenges from the first game, new 'campaigns' string multiple rooms together and limit your retries. And throughout the entire experience there's a steady feed of concept artwork, character trophies and backstory.

So if *Arkham Asylum* was defined by its limits, *Arkham City* is a careful, considered exercise in stripping those limits away. Its open city lets players be a different kind of Batman to the stealthy predator of *Asylum* – this is the Batman of dropped smoke pellets and theatrical getaways, the Batman with an ear to the ground for the strong picking on the weak, and the Batman who floats above the city with a gothic majesty. It's less focused, but more diverse, a miniseries rather than *Asylum*'s moody one-shot. And at its heart, Rocksteady's defining take on its star remains just as you always imagined him – kicking, punching, sneaking and now flying. Arkham City might be filled with landmarks to visit and villains to smite, but being the Batman is still its primary draw, and Rocksteady doesn't let you forget it.

9

Post Script

Interview: Sefton Hill, game director, and Jamie Walker, studio director, Rocksteady Studios

Talking to Rocksteady, it's obvious where the passion for Batman that the *Arkham* games exude has come from. We sit down with **Sefton Hill** and **Jamie Walker** to discuss the move from a closed-off world to an open one, and the process of ensuring that Catwoman is worthy of sharing Batman's limelight.

The world of *Arkham City* is open, but relatively contained. How did you work out the ideal size?
SH Right from the start, we thought something in-between an open world and [Arkham Asylum] was an interesting place to be. You have the freedom to feel like Batman, to make choices as you play, but you still have the drive and focus of a story-driven game. Those were the things we wanted to get across. The first game had a focused story, and we wanted to keep that because the characters and the relationship between them defines Batman. We wanted to keep it, but give you the feeling of being Batman in Gotham City.
JW From an art point of view we didn't just want to build a bigger city. We wanted to build a highly detailed, rich experience for the city. So open-world for us was something that offered freedom to the player but not at the expense of detail.

Did you miss the tighter asylum setting? How did you approach directing players in a more open space?
SH That was really one of the big challenges – if you go open, does it affect your ability to tell a good story when you can't predict where the player is at any given time? We worked on a few things for that. One of them was the surveillance system we put in, where you're constantly overhearing people speaking in the world. You're hearing the energy and life of the city, they're commenting on things you've done and what you're doing, and putting everything you're doing into context. And we do still have the more focused, story-driven environments, especially in internal areas.

Do you have any desire to return to a tighter environment in future?
SH I think it really depends on the story you want to tell. I've always felt that there's a place for a strong singleplayer game. People are saying [games] need to be multiplayer and more open-world, but then we get stuff like *Uncharted*, which is a great, focused singleplayer experience that I really enjoy. With this game, the idea was: 'I want to be Batman in Gotham City,' and then we asked: 'What does that mean? What's exciting about being in Gotham as Batman?' It was the freedom of choice. We knew then that we had to expand out and create a more open world. But I don't think that's the only way to go with Batman.



Sefton Hill



Jamie Walker

"Catwoman's definitely an interesting character. I think there's a lot more we can do with her"



Catwoman feels different to Batman. How easily did the control mechanics translate?
SH She was challenging because we knew she couldn't just traverse the city the way Batman does. We had the idea that she would have this very intimate, close relationship with the city in the way she moved, which is where we got the idea of her using her claws to climb up the sides of buildings, giving a much more feline sense of movement from the start. Our animator does a lot of combat choreography himself, coming up with moves and counters that feel very distinct. Catwoman works mostly the same way as Batman, though she's a little different because of her animations. If someone goes to strike her and she goes to strike them, she's faster, so she'll win some battles that Batman might lose if you'd pressed strike at the same time.

Was it a challenge to design the city with two characters in mind?
SH We designed the city to work for Batman initially, and then, as we developed Catwoman, we made her to fit the city. There were some things we moved and tweaked for Catwoman. There were no big changes, just some things we moved around slightly to make the experience as smooth as possible.

Why is she used as sparingly as she is?
SH We always said it was Batman's game. That's the short answer, really. It's Batman's story. We were interested in Catwoman because we felt she was someone who offered a really nice contrast to Batman, but we felt the story that we'd written was his story, and that she had a small but important role to play in it. We always described her as the guest star in the game.
JW We wanted to tell a really dramatic story, and I think you can only do that if you focus on one character at a time. I think by focusing on Batman we were able to tell a better Batman story.

Would you like to return to her in more depth?
SH She's definitely an interesting character. I think there's a lot more we can do with Catwoman, for definite. But more than that would be hard to say.

Could you imagine taking on a character with more outlandish powers?
SH I don't think [having a very human hero] is an important part of making a game work, full stop. But it's certainly what interests me, personally. That conflict between power and vulnerability excites and inspires us.
JW To me, Batman is a possible hero. Anyone could be Batman with enough money and training. And that's what's exciting. ■

Dark Souls

Descending a granite staircase early in *Dark Souls*, you find a Black Knight obstructing the corridor below. He stands with his back turned, oblivious to your approach. A white loot orb glows cheekily at the far end of the passage. Lesser games might telegraph this enemy's difficulty by showing it rear its head back and screech, flecking the camera lens with spittle. Such condescension would be superfluous in From Software's action-RPG template. The mere outline of the knight's horned helmet – instantly recognisable from the game's box art – sets your pulse galloping.

You know he'll be an ornery bastard, relentless and overpowering. He will carve you into slices finer than a deli ham. But the option here of whether or not to engage is a calculated farce. You know that, after wiping your palms off on your trouser legs and taking a deep breath, you'll provoke the Black Knight. Because glowing loot is to the RPG enthusiast as fire is to the moth. Put simply, 'compulsion' is too weak a word.

In order to keep a reassuring distance, you hurl a throwing knife before switching hastily back to your primary weapon. The Black Knight hardly flinches as he pivots around to face you, still terrifyingly mute. Then he charges. Just like the moth, your flailing, flapping demise is both grim and comically Chaplin-esque.

You died, says the game, just in case you'd mistaken your hero's slumping to the ground for a sudden fit of narcolepsy. You died. This curt declaration appears on your screen with such dispiriting frequency over the course of your time with *Dark Souls*, the words practically burn into your TV screen. You died.

Just like its 2009 predecessor *Demon's Souls*, *Dark Souls* mirrors the Black Knight's posture. The game stands with its back to gamers who feel entitled to the coddling of selectable difficulty tiers, enemies with neon-signposted weakspots, and checkpoints as tightly spaced as a trail of *Pac-Man* dots. Anyone who expects to button-mash their way to victory should avoid playing *Dark Souls* entirely and simply watch walkthrough videos with a bucket of popcorn in their lap.

Dark Souls has all the trappings of a rote fantasy RPG. You'll select from the usual bundle of character classes – warrior, hunter, pyromancer, cleric, et al. You'll chop down undead and skeletons and plague-infested sewer rats – and if you persevere long enough, proud dragons. But don't be fooled. Embracing a slew of the RPG genre's hallmarks enables the game's designers to subvert player expectations with sadistic glee.

Nobody toasts your arrival, for a start. As a giant raven spirits you away from the moss-covered ruins of the Undead Asylum (*Dark Souls*' tutorial stage) to the game's proper beginning, the crone narrator recounts an ancient prophecy. Nothing about a Chainmail Messiah destined to save the world; just vague allusion to an

Publisher Namco Bandai
Developer From Software
Format 360, PS3 (version tested)
Release Out now


bit.ly/pMYmQU
Screenshot gallery

Anyone who expects to button-mash should avoid Dark Souls entirely and just watch walkthroughs



undead who will be chosen to leave the asylum in pilgrimage. The scant few NPCs you bump into along the way tend to greet you with sneers and derisive laughter. One mentions the location of a couple of bells that could use ringing, but stops short of volunteering directions or the outcome you can expect. There is no map, mini or otherwise. There is no quest log. Blow off steam by smashing all the boxes and clay pots you want, but don't expect any goodies to spill out.

Dark Souls starves you of information, thereby stoking your hunger to explore and untangle its opaque narrative and mechanics. Random notes about items and weapons flash up on the post-death loading screen, which you will parse with the fervency of a Talmud scholar. The game's unique online features, however – players can leave pre-programmed hints and warnings on the ground, which populate other players' worlds – undermine the dopamine rush of hard-fought epiphany. Many will relish the company of these ghosts. If *Dark Souls* has difficulty tiers, there are just two: Insane (online with hint graffiti) and Teeth Gnashingly Impenetrable (offline).

For a genre so handicapped by its thrall to almighty Lore – an endless reshuffling of fridge-magnet poetry using words plucked from Tolkien's Silmarillion – *Dark Souls*' most revolutionary design choice involves giving the world just enough history to feel concrete and then dive-rolling out of the player's way.

Dark Souls' most seismic achievement – the thing that parlays the grandeur of *Demon's Souls* into something improbably greater – is its persistent open world. If you could feasibly conquer *Dark Souls* without dying, you'd stumble across the occasional momentary framerate freefall, but not a single loading screen. The Nexus hub world and level-based structure of *Demon's Souls* tacitly marked your progress through its adventure, but *Dark Souls* splinters that measuring stick over its knee and dares you to approximate the dimensions of its universe.

As you butt up against what you naively assume to be the outer rim of its world, a defeated boss drops a key that opens a door leading into subterranean sewers. Beat another boss at the bottom of the sewers and the world peels back further, sending you down into a massive cylindrical hole leading to a foetid shantytown. You delve farther down, expecting to hit bedrock. There can't be another layer. Can there?

You shrug off your claustrophobia and spelunk deeper still. Yet another sprawling domain opens up. You get dizzy with the scale, unsettled and insecure about the progress you've made, like the explorers in Danielewski's House Of Leaves descending the book's infernal, ever-expanding spiral staircase. After all, this is just one of many paths you can explore in



ABOVE Even with heavy armour boosting your defensive stats, the lizard warriors in Sen's Fortress are plenty lethal. RIGHT When these sewer frogs' bellies inflate, they're about to spew black steam that will curse you







ABOVE While most games are content to merely pit you against undead enemies, the concept of being undead (or 'hollow') permeates *Dark Souls*. You begin the game hollow yourself, locked away in an asylum. Regaining human form through humanity points lets you summon other players to help and kindle bonfires to increase your health flask limit. LEFT Take a direct hit from the Taurus Demon's hammer and your health bar will shrink faster than the mercury in a thermometer being used to stir a Slush Puppie

the world of *Dark Souls*. You could've explored the Catacombs instead. Or the Darkroot Basin lake, shimmering in moonlight, with its projectile-spewing Hydra. Welcome to the most memorable game world since... wait a second, did we just consider deleting the word 'since'?

If each new bonfire checkpoint – where you'll replenish health, manage inventory and spend harvested souls on level upgrades – amounts to a paragraph break, boss encounters punctuate the *Dark Souls* experience like calligraphic exclamation marks. The scale of these behemoths provides the game's creature artists an outsized canvas on which to lavish their most inspired and varied design work. You've got the traditional cast of hideous, snarling winged lizards and fire demons, of course. But more exceptional and memorable are the beautiful (a giant siren-lilting butterfly) and the unexpectedly sympathetic (a once-proud wolf struggles to limp along on three paws moments before you deliver the finishing blow).

From Software leaves untouched the combat template it established in *Demon's Souls*. It was perfectly conceived then, and remains so. The pace of combat has a slow, decisive rhythm, and if you're playing a melee character, you'll learn the finer points of shield-play or appear suicidal to onlookers. Even the 'easiest' foe in *Dark Souls* can prove lethal if you get impatient and insist on taking one extra swipe instead of blocking at the moment you know you damn well ought to. A press of the left stick locks you on to the nearest enemy, although at times it tends to inexplicably target one clearly outside the scrum.

Dark Souls carries over the economy of its predecessor's audio design, too. Though boss confrontations play out to hackneyed operatic chanting, most of the game jettisons traditional musical accompaniment entirely. The metallic clang of a sword against a shield provides *Dark Souls'* cymbal crash; the breeze through tree branches in Darkroot Garden, its woodwinds; the gamepad rumble of a giant's footsteps, its bass drum. There's nothing artificial to lend a sense of heroism to your exploits in combat or ease the throttling loneliness of your exploration. There is only your porcelain-fragile mortality and whatever terrible threat lies crouching beyond the next blind corner.

Just because the world is treacherous doesn't mean it can't also be beautiful. Just as your eyes have adjusted to the darkness of the Catacombs, you step through a doorway into a bright, subterranean cavern. Sunlight floods through a fissure in the earth high above, illuminating the silvery ribbon of a gushing waterfall.

Most contemporary games are unctuous, clingy suitors, welcoming players with fawning deference and open arms. Conversely, *Dark Souls* beckons the masochistic with its chilly indifference. If you steel your nerves and persevere, the loot you'll uncover is an adventure so exquisitely morose and far-ranging that it will tug at your mind insistently during the hours you spend apart. After more than 60 hours into our journey, an NPC clucks: "How do these martyrs keep chugging along? I'd peter out in an instant." We do so, quite simply, because other games feel comparatively bland, facile and unsatisfying. Few will complete *Dark Souls*, but that fact won't nullify the adventures they've had straining toward its elusive summit.

9



SOUL HARVEST

Dark Souls asks players to stomach a fair bit of grind, since everything from levelling up to purchasing upgrades and items costs souls (no selling off redundant loot, sorry). Combat always requires concentration, however, so grind never feels like sleepwalking a half marathon. In traditional RPGs, killing enemies awards the player both currency and experience. *Dark Souls* gives you both as well, however only the currency is quantified numerically. The experience you gain from killing foes is just that: actual combat experience, which is essential despite being immaterial. In order to progress farther into each zone in the game, you'll need to hone strategies for each enemy type, which you'll refine with each successive expedition.

One of the surliest enemies is this mangy feline, which can swallow you whole. Best to retreat to where its lunging attacks can't reach you. A vanquished miniboss doesn't respawn when you die or rest at a bonfire

Post Script

How Dark Souls forces us to reconsider what makes a social game

Warning: this section discusses enemies and locations, and therefore contains minor spoilers.

During his keynote talk at the 2007 Game Developers Conference, **Shigeru Miyamoto** explained that he made the progression through the *The Legend Of Zelda*'s dungeons confounding, so that players would "start to talk and think about the game, share their ideas on how to beat the game." Forget about Zynga, Playfish and the rest – based on this criterion, *Dark Souls* could very well be the most social game ever made. It's dangerous to go alone.

Just like *Demon's Souls* before it, *Dark Souls* mitigates its fist-biting difficulty – if only a hair – by providing online functionality that allows players to leave hints and warnings in the game world. These brief messages, cobbled together from a pool of available sentence fragments, show up as spectral graffiti on the ground for others playing online. "Be wary of ____ ahead!" they might say. Or something as simple as "Look up!"

But what if the game hasn't been released yet? One of the pleasures of reviewing games is the chance to play them first. Stepping into a massive roleplaying game feels like being an explorer from centuries past, setting out to chart the interior of previously unmapped continents. Unfortunately in the case of *Dark Souls*, this also means being the explorer who dies of dysentery because hunger drives him to eat some benign-looking shrub that has yet to be catalogued as poisonous.

You certainly get poisoned in *Dark Souls*. Leprous sewer rats and foetid marshes are more than willing to accommodate you. But poison isn't what nearly broke our spirit. No, that distinction went to The Curse.

As we splashed merrily down into the sewers beneath Lower Undead Burg, nobody had the decency to inform us we should be wary of the frogs. In any other videogame a warning about frogs would be met with sniggering and eye rolls. But in *Dark Souls*, even the most bog-standard enemy can leave you trembling due to the mortal threat posed. If we possessed eyes as bulbous and unblinking as those frogs, we still wouldn't have seen the curse coming.

When the frog notices our presence, it waddles over and throws its head back. Our first error in judgment: a panicked sideways lunge-roll. We should've stood our ground and decapitated it, but instead we allow just enough time for its belly to inflate grotesquely. Before we can regain our footing and strike, the frog envelops us in a cloud of black steam like some heedless cigar smoker. The word "!CURSED!" flashed up in red lettering, awkwardly book-ended with exclamation points to reinforce the direness of the situation. Then we noticed that half of our health bar was greyed out.

When we sustained our third curse and our health bar halved again, we got light-headed. Dark Souls had won



We were undaunted. After all, in *Demon's Souls* we spent 95 per cent of the game playing with half a health bar, and we still managed to finish it. So, after respawning at a nearby bonfire, we ventured into the sewers once again. We'd be ready for the frogs this time, we thought. Plus we were already cursed, so a similar blunder would merely prompt another respawn. Cue similar blunder. In our defence, we could have easily avoided the second curse if three of those pesky Kermits hadn't hemmed us in, blocking our escape.

Oh dear. It takes a few seconds to register, but our health bar has just halved again, reduced to a *quarter* of its original length. The red of our health now looks more like a dab than a bar. This is unconscionable. Even *Demon's Souls* isn't this spiteful. In what appears to be the game sensing how distraught we've become, it offers up a rare nugget of assistance. To break curses, we must visit a healer in New Londo or purchase a purging stone. Only two problems: 1) we can't recall ever seeing a purging stone for sale, and 2) we've not yet discovered New Londo.

Fortuitously, while crying on the shoulder of a colleague who'd just begun playing the game himself, he recognised the name New Londo. It was down a staircase beside the game's very first bonfire, he told us. Of course it was! After two dozen hours and countless snoozes beside that bonfire, we'd never noticed its deceptive placement. Elaborate wikis and forum threads will eventually provide such assistance to beleaguered travellers, but the system of tips and warnings the developer lets players scrawl on the ground entices you to stay in the game instead of rushing for your Internet browser every few minutes.

We spent a full day repeating that New Londo sequence trying to reach the healer. You could see him standing atop a roof, but the house was infested with murderous ghosts. We could only sustain two hits. It was impossible. We'd have to abandon New Londo and find the purging stone. Common sense would place it close to the site of the curse. Back into the sewers.

When we sustained our third curse and our health bar halved again, we got light-headed. *Dark Souls* had won. Reduced to a walking one-hit kill, we'd have to start a new game. Only a pride-gulping entreaty to Twitter led us to the stone – we nearly offered that benevolent stranger a Direct Massage – and even then it was nigh-impossible to reach without taking a blow.

After breaking the curse and restoring our health bar – which felt like the first sign of thaw after a 100-year winter – we turned once again toward the sewers on a quest for vengeance. Now, which way were they again? Any ideas? ■

Rage

The irony of Bethesda's acquisition of id is that it has made *Rage* and *Fallout* cousins when, in all honesty, it's hard to imagine them getting along. There's a resemblance, certainly – you can see it in the junkyard aesthetic of the rickety shanty towns that the inhabitants of both wastelands have thrown together, you can hear it in the snarls of the mutated monsters lurking in the hideouts beneath both game's surfaces, and you can feel it in the similarly black-humoured approach to the end of civilisation. But the likeness only goes skin deep. Where *Fallout* is freeform, *Rage* is focused; where *Fallout*'s execution is shonky, *Rage* is technically flawless; and where *Fallout* is abstract and statistical, *Rage* is upfront and personal.

And, visually, id's game blows Bethesda's in-house title out of the water – and not just because it's running at an unbroken 60fps or packing id's much-vaunted MegaTexture tech. Beneath the brown, rugged surface there's real character here – in the lined and weathered faces of NPCs, for instance, or in the way a shaft of sunlight has been angled to hit a pile of artfully aligned rubble just so. It's an artistry that comes at the cost of environments that react to your bullets in only the most superficial of ways, but nonetheless, the world of *Rage* shows that id's artists are capable of much more than gruesome cyber-horror.

Less of a departure from *Doom* and *Quake* is what you actually do. *Rage* is about shooting things, mostly, and it does shooting things well. Enemies have a hint of bullet sponge about them even on the lower difficulties, which, coupled with their tendency to move quickly and unpredictably about the environment, develops a sense of urgency about putting them down before you get overwhelmed. Even the unarmoured, unsubtle mutants, who will charge the moment they clap their glowing green eyes upon you, have a habit of swerving sideways or leaping to the ceiling as you settle your crosshair upon them. Your health recharges (making health-restoring bandages seem superfluous), but die and you'll get a chance to respawn on the spot by successfully completing a minigame that sparks off the defibrillator in your technically-not-a-space-marine's chest. It needs to recharge between uses, but it provides a safety net that minimises the danger of experimental – or just plain foolhardy – assaults.

Your armoury is disappointingly unflashy, offering the usual selection of short-to-long-range shooters, though special mention must go to a crossbow capable of firing barbs that turn enemies into walking bombs controlled directly by the player. Mostly, however, the game relies on its engineering system to deliver tactical nuance. Components can be bought from vendors in the game's city hubs, or found scattered around, and the products of this system include the bladed wingsticks (capable of stealth kills as well as slicing through necks), turrets, mobile spider bots and explosive RC cars. We rarely found ourselves in a situation we couldn't shoot our way out of, but sending in a sentry bot to soak up bullets before wiping out the distracted bandits was more entertaining.

Publisher Bethesda
Developer id Software
Format 360 (version tested), PS3, PC
Release Out now

The world of Rage shows that id's artists are capable of much more than gruesome cyber-horror



MAD MAXES
Co-op missions entitled 'Legends of the Wasteland' see you and a friend battling through small portions of singleplayer maps. Some missions require some simple co-ordination – one player must pull a lever to reveal a bomb, the other must disarm it – that shows up the lack of interesting challenges in singleplayer even further. Others drop you back in familiar scenarios, but play cleverly with your knowledge of what to expect. The drop to 30fps rendering, however, is jarring. It's still entirely playable, but the loss makes you appreciate just how much character is achieved when the game is flying at 60fps.

But before you can blow a bandit hideout to smithereens, you have to drive there. *Rage*'s vehicular combat is more than a little reminiscent of *Twisted Metal*, along with, in the races, a dash of *Mario Kart*. Vehicles circle each other, throwing up shields and exchanging rocket and cannon fire, until one turns into a gorgeous-looking ball of flame. Unfortunately, despite the option to hop out of your vehicle at any time, *Rage*'s vehicle sections and its on-foot gunplay rarely intersect, missions instead being built around driving to FPS sections separated by a loading screen.

In a leftfield move, it's the driving around which id has chosen to build its multiplayer experience. In a market crowded by shooters, it was the right choice – it takes human players for the joy of its vehicular carnage to fully emerge. One match type sees players racing to pick up crystals scattered around a map, before returning to a constantly moving base to bank the points – cue angry collisions over crystals and furious chases to stop fully stocked players getting back to base. Triad Rally, meanwhile, requires players to zip through three checkpoints in a row before they can collect any points, something that proves tricky enough against one other player, let alone three. And while the courses in question have been mostly snipped from *Rage*'s open world, in this context they make more sense.

That's because *Rage*'s open world is essentially a prop, a way of joining up disparate levels as well as an excuse for occasionally reusing them. Visit some parts of the map between missions and you'll see empty film sets, waiting for the next scripted tussle to take place. More effective are the two town hubs to which you return between missions to sell junk, receive quests and play the odd minigame. These atmospheric townships work hard to depict the communities the story has you fighting to save, which is critical, because the plot throws you up against power-armoured Combine wannabes The Authority without making any effort to convince you of their nastiness first.

In its later stages, *Rage* becomes a slog. Enemies get tougher, and the repeated pattern of rooms filling with monsters – which must be killed before, say, a door falls off its hinges – begins to drag. Objectives, meanwhile, rarely move beyond simple fetch quests. There's a fine line between sticking to what you're best at and being stuck in your ways, and id occasionally crosses it. *Rage* is a stunningly rendered FPS, but one that seems caught between a desire to innovate and the desire to be true to the template its creators defined.

7



RIGHT Buggy upgrades can be earned by winning races or battles. They range from the cosmetic – including a couple of jokey id-themed skins – to the useful, with better armour and weapons. BELOW Who are The Authority? We're still not really sure. They put up a good fight, however, ducking and rolling between cover, and hiding behind shielded comrades

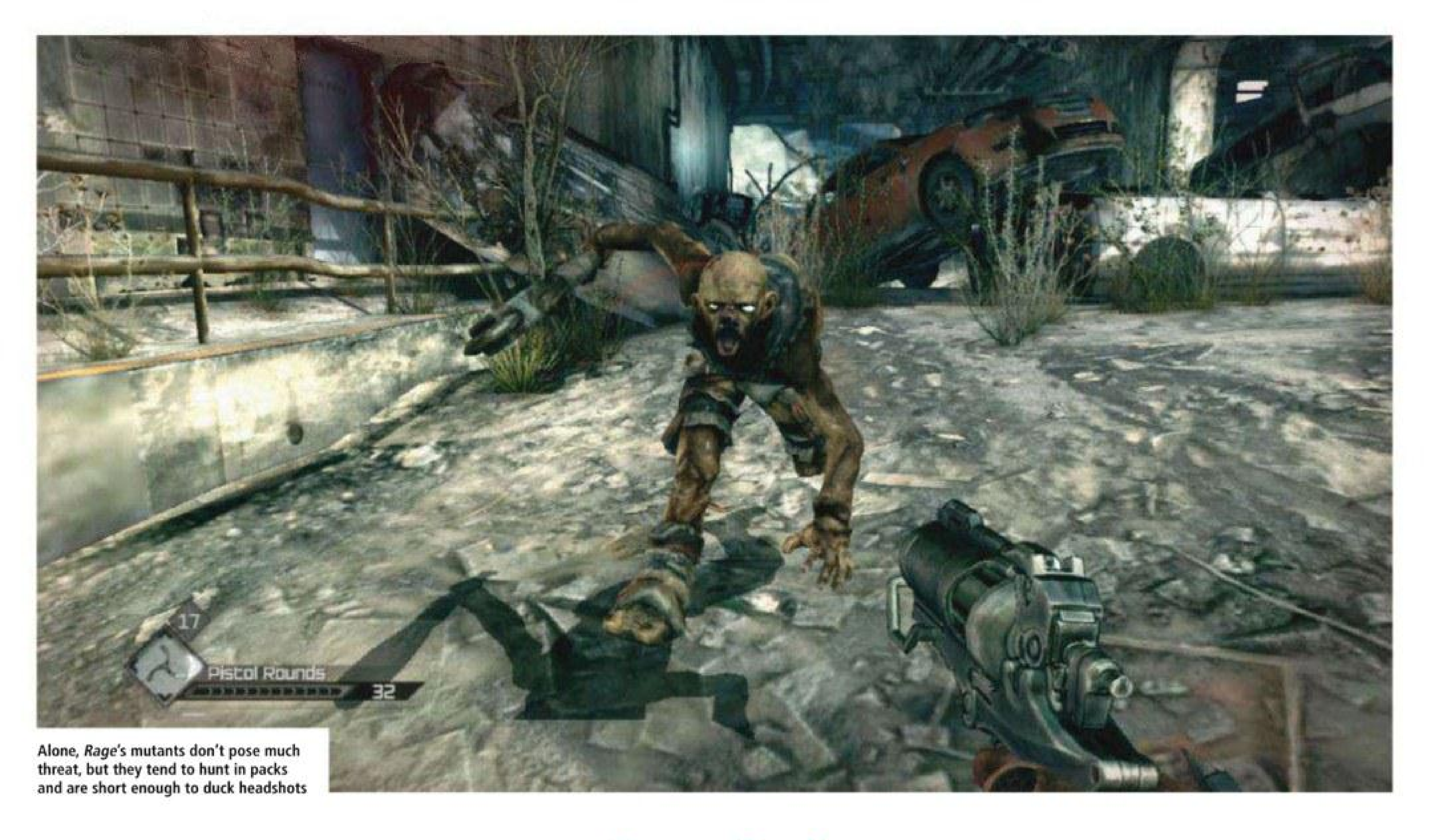




ABOVE There's a sci-fi Old West visual theme running through the first half of the game that recalls early *Fallout*s (and, of course, *New Vegas*). Things turn to a slightly harder-edged brand of sci-fi as *Rage* builds to a climax



The shotgun weapon is as meaty as you'd expect from a game made by id, but it can be loaded with homemade explosive pellets that turn it into a spectacularly gory quasi-grenade launcher



Alone, *Rage*'s mutants don't pose much threat, but they tend to hunt in packs and are short enough to duck headshots

Post Script

Rage's world is richly detailed and convincing – until you attempt to interact with it

Play *Rage* with company and it's likely to attract more than the occasional admiring glance. This is – and it bears repeating – an astonishing-looking game, even on six-year-old Xbox 360 hardware. Indeed, it almost singlehandedly manages to rehabilitate brown. It's partly the detail – rusted, corrugated iron sheeting appears speckled with dirt and decay, while magnificent skyboxes hang like matte paintings suspended overhead – but also the smoothness, that crucial 60fps coupling with exceptional animation to make a game that snares the attention of passers-by.

And, of course, there are the enemies designed to show off that fluid motion to its fullest. Mutants leap and flip around levels, hanging from ceilings and crawling along the floor. Shoot one in the leg while it's charging and it'll topple convincingly. Send out a sentry bot and the spindly legged contraption will scuttle along walls towards targets – lashing out with its legs as enemies get close. These aren't simply characters designed to look good, they're designed to move well. It extends to larger elements, too: hop into a vehicle, and every subtle adjustment of its suspension is visible as it flows over the contours of the rugged landscapes.

The lowered framerate of co-op mode demonstrates just how key the smoothness is to *Rage*'s visual appeal. Diminished like this, enemies lose their character too, going through all the same motions, but without the same flair. It's reminiscent of another recent co-op frame-dropper – *Just Cause* developer Avalanche's top-down twin-stick shooter *Renegade Ops*. The game features buggies that bounce and bristle with machine-guns in a manner not too dissimilar to those in *Rage*, but played in splitscreen, the subtleties of its nuanced control system are undermined by the reduction in frame rate.

But, as beautiful as *Rage* looks, and as well as it moves, at some point you're bound to begin experimenting with its environments. The flower pots, empty bottles, traffic cones and other assorted pieces of urban detritus left scattered around its levels, for instance – perfect fodder, surely, for a bit of target practice. This is *Rage*'s first disappointment, long before the repetitive missions kick in or the traditional id monster closets appear. You can shoot at the textures for as long as you want, but you're going to find them oddly impervious to damage. And while grenades cause enemies to pop into crimson, gib-spitting clouds, they're not going to so much as rustle the contents of a nearby toolbox.

Rage takes place a world designed to be looked at, not interacted with. And in a market where Havok's physics engine is all but ubiquitous, the effect is surprisingly unnerving. *Rage*'s chunky guns are satisfying flesh shredders, but they might as well be spitting puffs of air when put to use on anything that can't bleed.

Rage's world could never accommodate a gravity gun, or Adam Jensen's fridge-lobbing antics from *Human Revolution*. It's not designed to, of course, but it's the incidental as much as the deliberate that can make a reactive world so involving. There's no need for *Halo*'s Theatre mode in *Rage*, because the static settings simply can't provide the spontaneous interactions of enemies, objects and player that make a session in Bungie's games worth revisiting.

Few games are as eye-catching as *Rage* (it really does bear repeating), and it's quite a debut for id Tech 5. But the application of this powerful technology has been towards creating a world that's sumptuously decorated yet strangely hollow, filled with creatures that, by contrast, move and react almost entirely convincingly. Delivering an experience that measures up equally on all fronts at least gives the next generation of console hardware something to aim at. ■

Super Mario 3D Land

Publisher Nintendo
Developer In-house
Format 3DS
Release November 18

It may have been developed by EAD Tokyo, but *Super Mario 3D Land* isn't a 3DS spin on *Super Mario Galaxy*. And it might have that familiar raccoon tail wagging at the end of its logo, but *3D Land* isn't really a sequel to *Super Mario Bros 3*, either. What *3D Land* is, then, is Mario, not quite as you know him today, but perhaps as you faintly remember him from days gone by.

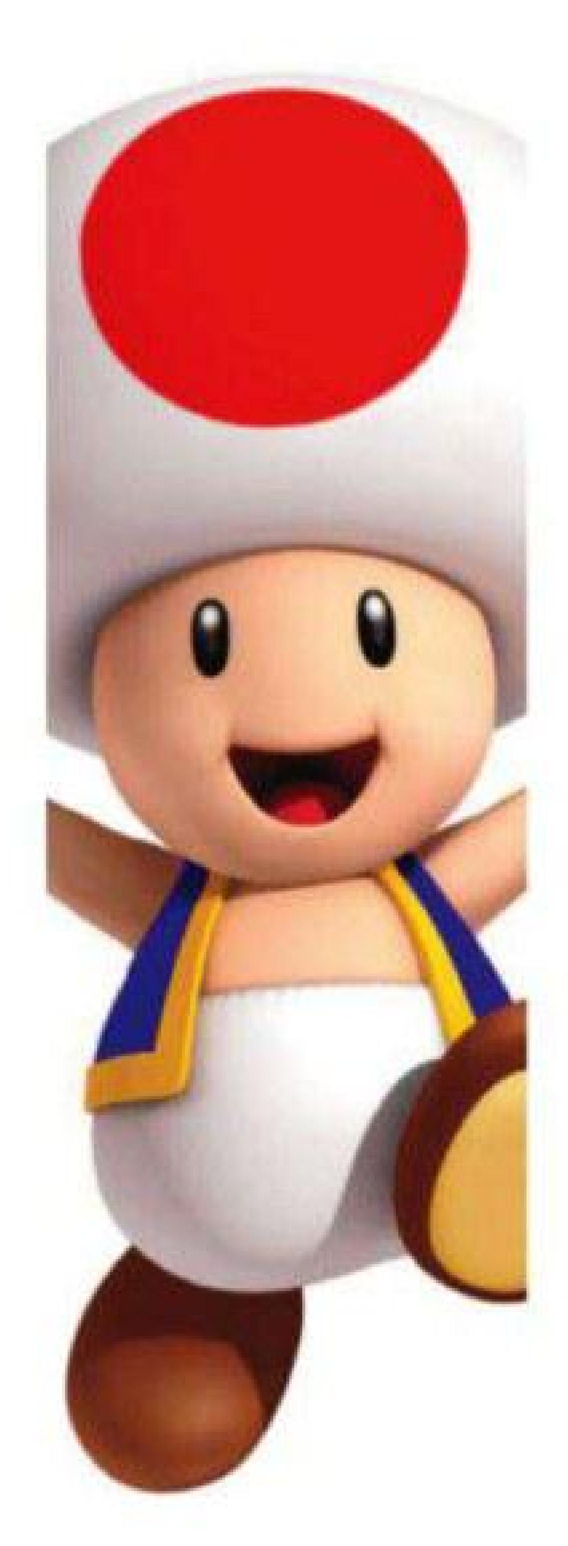
He feels different. The supple gymnastics of the *Galaxy* games have been toned down by the removal of that exuberant triple jump, and the addition of a small charge time at the start of his backflip. These tweaks, together with a frankly plodding default walking speed (you'll spend the most of the game with the run button held down), make for a plumber who comes as close to his NES incarnation as any 3D Mario so far, and one you can't fling around with quite the same abandon as in recent years.

Levels often hang in *Galaxy*-like voids, but whereas the Wii games built their challenges around those signature spheres of fun, *3D Land*'s timed courses are defined by the straighter edges of the cubes, blocks and tiles from which they are constructed. They're no less tightly designed, however – the early levels are relatively spacious, easing your acquaintance with this new Mario's abilities, before giving way to the pure, uncluttered platforming found in the later stages.

And these levels are enhanced by some of best, most subtle use of 3D on the system so far. The effect is pervasive, but never distracting, combining with the usually sidescrolling camera to make the game feel like a toybox diorama brought to fizzling life. Does the 3D effect aid players in judging the gap between platforms when making tricky jumps, as has been claimed? Well, it certainly doesn't hurt, although we still relied on Mario's shadow when it came to judging landings. But falling slowly with the aid of a new propeller power-up through hundreds of feet of sky, aiming for a lone platform suspended in the air, with 3D turned up to maximum, is a vertigo-inducing thrill. And playing through a level viewed via a top-down camera – meaning that every jump sends Mario leaping up to meet you – is a gimmicky delight. Even more gimmicky are the optical-illusion rooms – isometric platforming challenges that hide the gaps between platforms with a fixed camera angle, forcing you to rely on the 3D effect to judge their relative position. These elements come as close as possible to breaking Nintendo's own rule about not making 3D essential to progress – or at least they would if players weren't given the option of glimpsing the challenges from the side before making their attempt from memory.

That propeller isn't the only power-up, of course. The Tanooki suit's prominence in *Super Mario 3D Land*'s logo is wholly justified – you can find it in, or bring it to, every level of the game – and in fact, if you let it, it can come close to undermining the experience. Its tail attack is *Galaxy*'s spin attack transposed, but it's the floating, Yoshi-esque flutter jump that's a bigger issue. A skilled player can abuse it without realising – only noticing after a restart the intricate positioning of platforms and carefully designed challenges with which it allowed them to only partially engage. And if there's any doubt that this is precisely what it's designed for, die too many times and the game will hand you a sparkling invincible version of the suit when you restart. The new boomerang suit, meanwhile, feels redundant, offering very little that a fireflower can't. It's difficult, in fact, to believe this is same team that conjured up Cloud Mario.

It's enhanced by some of best, most subtle use of 3D on the system so far. The effect is pervasive, but never distracting



But if the power-ups are a let down, the game's pick-and-mix approach to Mario history isn't. The flags from *Super Mario Bros* mark the end point of every level (and figuring out how to nab an extra life by landing on the top of the pole is an optional but irresistible challenge). The airships from *Super Mario Bros 3* rotate with Bowser's Castle levels as end-of-world gauntlets. *Galaxy 2*'s flip-switches return. And new twists keep coming – Boo-packed haunted houses that send Mario running along the keys of a giant piano; switches that cause level geometry to unpack itself around him before folding back away; levels made almost entirely out crisscrossing strands of bouncy rope.

And yet *Super Mario 3D Land* feels surprisingly conservative – if only by EAD Tokyo's own bountiful standards. Its seven-to-eight-hour length is hardly ungenerous, yet slight in comparison to previous games, and its opting for the simple reach-the-end-of-the-level approach inevitably leads to a less varied set of challenges than those offered by the stars of *Galaxy* and *64*, which would intersperse typical platforming gauntlets with sillier, one-shot ideas. And its quasi-side-on, time-limited levels might be perfectly suited to portable play, but come at the cost of more open, explorative designs.

But there's a joyousness here that wins out, a simple delight in the basics of running, jumping, collecting coins and bouncing into the air that leaves these mild disappointments behind, and a creative blending of *Mario*s past and present that makes the unabashed retread that was *New Super Mario Bros* appear almost cynical. *Super Mario 3D Land* is a magpie of a game, but it fuses its 2D and 3D influences to make a *Mario* that feels fresher than any handheld *Mario* in years. It's not a new *Galaxy*, but it's an ideal companion piece to EAD Tokyo's Wii games. Whereas they pushed up against the edge of the universe to show us what an unfettered *Mario* can do, *Super Mario 3D Land* does the opposite. It homes in, with a clockmaker's precision and a playful gleam in its eye, on what Mario does best.

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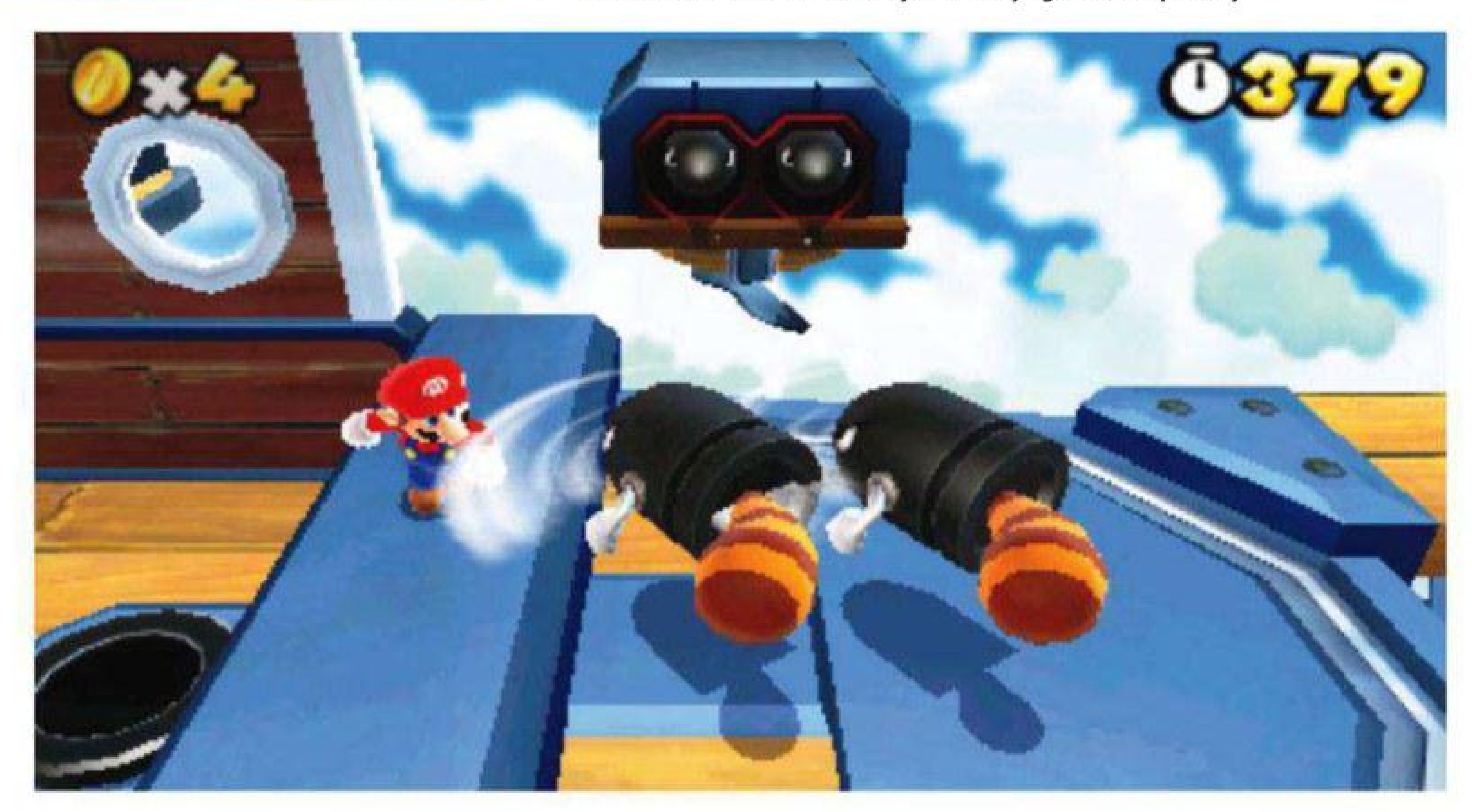






ABOVE *Galaxy* veterans will find the loss of Mario's spin attack tricky to get used to. Gaps are usually smaller in *3D Land*, but no longer being able to make mid-air corrections means you have to judge distances perfectly

ABOVE Their abilities are similar, but the boomerang suit does have one advantage over the fireflower: jumping over the returning projectile lets you keep it scything between baddies.
RIGHT Mario's not the only one with a Tanooki suit – even Bowser turns up with a tail at one point. The profusion of tailed enemies is explained by the ransacking of the Super Tree at the start of the game



Forza Motorsport 4

And so the biennial *Forza Motorsport* edition rolls out on to videogaming's increasingly congested racetrack. Picking out the competition, despite the heavy traffic, is easy: somewhere near the front, *Shift 2: Unleashed* and *Gran Turismo 5* trade paint as *Forza 3* pits from the lead, straight into retirement.

That front spot is the position *Forza 4* assumes it will take. It's a fair assumption, and one that should surprise no one. Turn 10's first two forays into *GT* territory went largely unnoticed by PlayStation owners, but third time out would have left all but the most ardent Polyphony aficionados in no doubt about the series' credentials. The game's combination of advanced handling dynamics, player-focused structure, unparalleled accessibility and unrivalled community-based emphasis delivered a supercharged package.

Number four, then, aims to convert the inconvertible. Cementing the already successful approach means the lightest of tinkering under the bonnet, hence the reason the career mode (now World Tour) strictly adheres to previous structure. Aside from a sprinkling of new elements – cone-based tests and Top Gear challenges – designed to inject a little variety and playfulness, the graft of progressing through increasingly difficult seasons while building up driver XP, credit levels and manufacturer affinity returns.

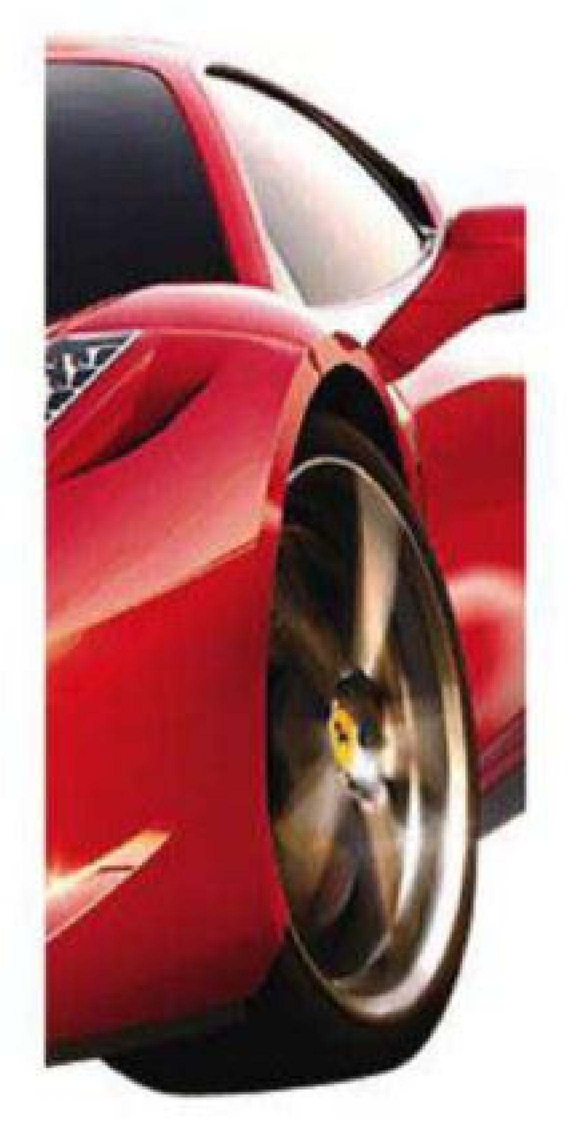
Of course, you won't fail to notice the game's improvements along the way. The excellent handling dynamics have been further enhanced, with cars displaying a more grounded attitude and tyre rubber biting into asphalt in a manner that sits yet closer to real-world behaviour and is almost always masterfully conveyed via your chosen method of control.

Engine notes sound rawer, too, while visuals have been brought up to date. Although *Forza 4* tailgates *GT5*'s focus on realism, its 60fps environment emerges a less sterile example than the approach adopted by the PlayStation exclusive, with the additional detail coming into play in subtle but effective ways. Blasting through Maple Valley, for instance, you get a genuine sense of passing beneath the circuit's overhanging trees, of being fully integrated into the setting. That said, a sprinkle of fertility wouldn't have hurt. We're not proposing the aesthetic excesses of *Dirt 3*, but *Shift 2*'s organic intensity would have enhanced the atmosphere further.

Still, if it's pretty graphics you want, visit Autovista. Designed to showcase an intriguing – if Ferrari-centric – selection of vehicles (as well as Turn 10's much-publicised IBL 3D rendering technique), this mode enables you to interact with these remarkably detailed machines in a manner that will delight those who loitered around *Test Drive Unlimited*'s dealerships. There is an element of a subgame, too (access to cars is granted by completing simple challenges – or you could kick off the Jeremy Clarkson descriptive voiceovers and time how long you manage before pressing B), making this one of few significant new singleplayer inclusions.

Publisher Microsoft Game Studios
Developer Turn 10
Format 360
Release Out now

Cementing the already successful approach means the lightest of tinkering under the bonnet



That said, singleplayer isn't the priority – the biggest upgrades focus on multiplayer. Here there are genuine heavyweight additions, all housed within a new Community area. Aside from a return of the series' celebrated UGC aspects, you'll find an Autolog-inspired Rivals option where opponents' times are posted for you to beat, thereby boosting your XP earnings. It's a simple system, but one that works. Then there are the *Forza* fun bits, with games of Cat and Mouse, Tag and new arrival Car Soccer (blame Top Gear).

More serious components include 16-player races – sadly not fully experienced prior to the game's release, though the online racing we managed displayed the franchise's usual robustness. But even this exciting prospect is likely to pale in comparison to the potential at the heart of the new Car Club feature. Here, Live chums team up to form a formidable *Forza* force – share cars, take on the responsibility of key roles (you can, for instance, assign tuning, graphic artists, or video editing specialists), and face off against their equal on the world stage. Expect the community to suck this option up with the urgency of a Pipercross.

If there are criticisms, they centre on the miserly offering of new tracks (just four – a reflection of the DLC age we live in) and the general lack of humanity within World Tour, despite the addition of elements such as the Top Gear challenges. Similarly, you'll find that your AI opposition could do with more personality, not to mention a little brain power. They can get as argumentative as Lewis Hamilton on-track, but don't assume they're complete idiots – one sniff of a gap and they'll dive in. It's also encouraging to see that you can pressurise them into mistakes.

On balance, the fourth *Forza* gets things right. The franchise has earned its place at the forefront of console racing sims and has done more for advancing the social/online element than any of its rivals. But at some point one of these sequels will have to drive the genre forward. For all its faults, *GT5* bravely offers a wide range of driving disciplines and throws additional variables such as weather and night racing into the mix. *Forza 4* isn't so bold, but in its defence it didn't take six years to turn up. What it does is offer an expertly refined driving model, a comprehensive yet effortlessly user-friendly tuning system – which enables it to uniquely cater for the most casual of Sunday drivers, as well as petrolheads wanting to digitally savour supercar ownership – and an unrelenting dedication to the fervent community it serves. True, the road it travels may be in danger of becoming as familiar as a daily commute but, for now, it's still a more exciting drive than *GT5*.

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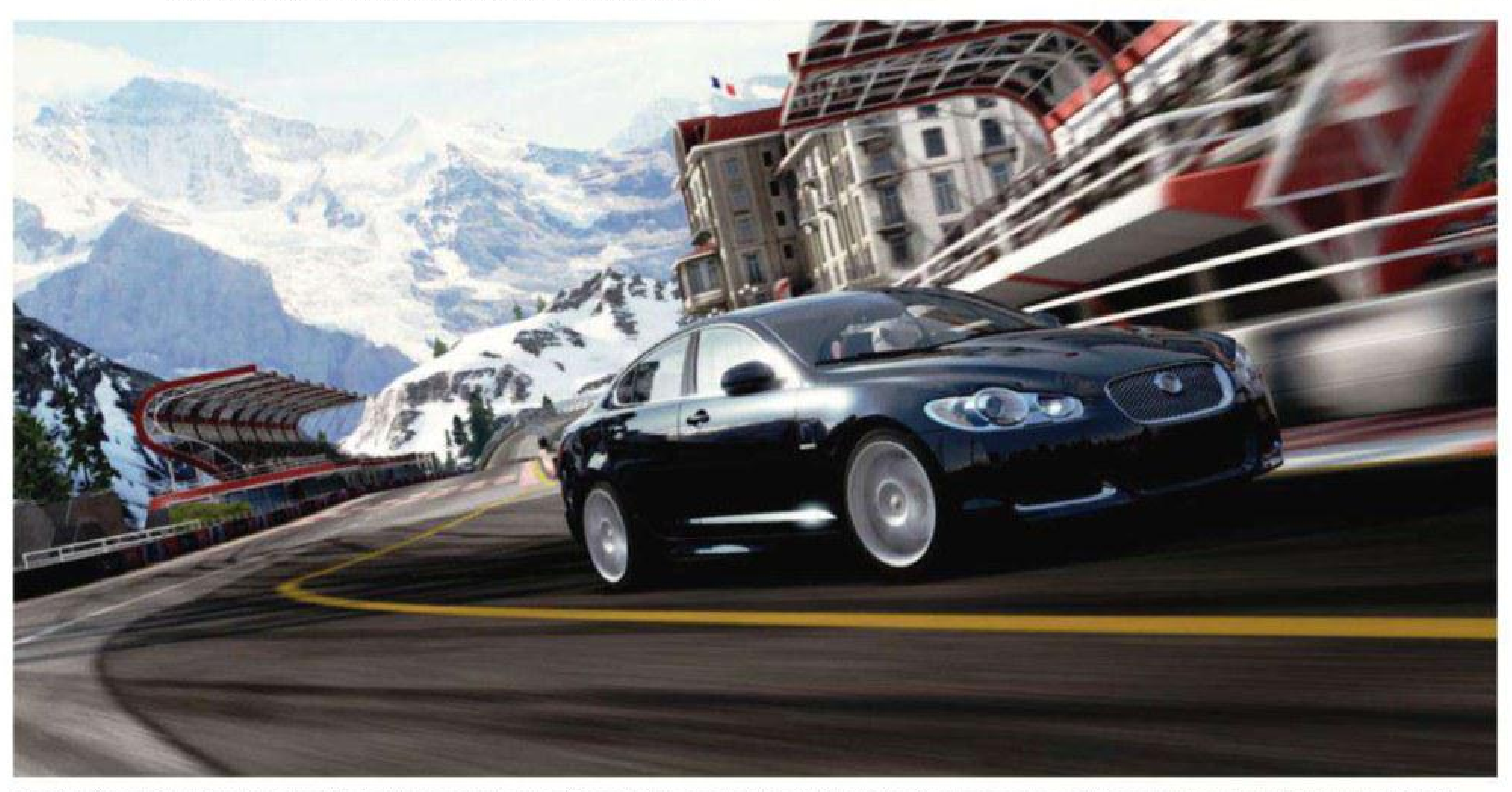


LEFT Sharp cornering, drifting, drafting, overtaking and so on now earn you badges, which add a simple but effective continual player reward mechanic.
BELOW The generous car selection from 80-plus manufacturers includes some delightfully obscure inclusions but also plenty of familiar faces – and the odd notable exclusion (Porsche)



ABOVE To unleash the full *Forza 4* experience you'll need to invest in a serious force-feedback wheel and pedal setup. It doesn't come cheap but the resulting Ford to Ferrari (or Aston Martin) difference is priceless





Forza 3 online purists will welcome Turn 10's decision to prevent some of the notorious corner cutting by introducing violent momentum-sapping segments on the previously exploited tracks

Disgaea 4: A Promise Unforgotten

Publisher Nippon Ichi
Developer In-house
Format PS3
Release November

No other developer has toyed with the tactical RPG formula as eagerly as Nippon Ichi. *Disgaea*, released in 2003, reinvigorated what had become a stagnant genre, pairing a riotous story of petulant demons and simpering angels with a deep and wide statistical playpen. Meanwhile, *Phantom Brave* and *Makai Kingdom* took the fundamental building blocks of the TRPG and rearranged them in bold, adventurous ways, even removing the gridded, chess-like boards in an effort to bring yet more freedom to what has always been one of gaming's most ordered avenues.

But of late that pioneering spirit has somewhat left the developer, which has reined in the risk-taking and settled into iterating within its most popular series. In many ways, *Disgaea 4* is exactly the sort of incremental update that Nippon Ichi sought to challenge with its early titles, a game that offers tweaks to an established framework rather than a rebuild from the ground up.

Nevertheless, it is a robust, engaging framework, and one that has become only marginally less potent through reiteration. Protagonist Valvatorez, a vampire who's given up human blood in favour of a diet of sardines, may lack the sharp bite of the first game's anti-hero, Laharl (who makes an appearance in *Disgaea 4*'s latter stages), but has enough character and voice to make the story colourful and enjoyable. *Disgaea 4* may slot new names and faces into the archetypes established by the earlier games in the series, but the plot contains enough absurdity to obfuscate its underlying adherence to formula.

The previous iteration's school theme has been discarded in favour of a political one here, with Valvatorez and his aide, Fenrich, seeking to mount a presidential campaign to seize power from the Netherworld government. It's a poignant choice of framing for a series that has always been about power, dominance and the claiming of territory, and as a result the plot marries mechanics with some success. As the story – once again divided into chapters that are structured like seasons in a Japanese anime show – develops, the writers take to the theme assuredly. A President Obama-alike even makes an appearance, complete with his 'Yes we can' slogan.

The fundamental structure remains unchanged. Battles play out on grid-based environments and charge you with defeating a team of opponents using your own handmade group of fighters. You take turns with the AI to move your team, casting spells, executing attacks and linking up into combos with adjacent friendly units. Strategy derives from the fact that a character's turn is finished only when they attack. This makes it possible to move your units back and forth around the map, positioning them for team combo attacks (earning valuable experience points as they do), before returning them to their starting position for their own attack.

Novelty comes in the form of Demon Fusion, an ability that allows multiple friendly monsters to merge together



YOUR OWN ADVENTURE
A map editor allows you to design custom maps with your own strongest units placed around the board as the enemies. These can be shared with other players via PSN but, more importantly, can also be used yourself to grind within and power-level your team. For the first time, then, Nippon Ichi gives us access to the other side of the tactical coin, allowing the shrewd player to design their own optimal map and then exploit it for their gain. Here, the game becomes a two-sided one: design followed by utilisation. The better the player at each half, the greater the rewards they will reap.

Flexibility is where *Disgaea*'s appeal lies, and few games reflect the sum of players' choices with such clarity.

Evilities – abilities that improve a character's performance in battle – make a return from *Disgaea 3*, as does the ability to Magichange, which transforms friendly monsters into weapons that can be used by human counterparts. Likewise Geo Panels and Geo Blocks are present, and Geo Symbols that add status effects to the terrain also return, along with all of the mind-bending puzzle elements that come as you try to clear stages in the most efficient manner possible while securing the greatest rewards. The vertical colour-breaking Geo Block puzzles are more fussy than the flat, 2D Geo Panel puzzles, but for those who posses the kind of logical mind needed, they're no less rewarding.

Novelty comes in the form of Demon Fusion, an ability that allows multiple friendly monsters to merge together into one giant unit, taking up multiple squares of the board. This move allows you to attack numerous enemies at once with huge sweeps of a paw, the drawback being that the engorged unit becomes a much easier target for enemies. Magichange and Demon Fusion can be combined to create devastatingly powerful weapons, although, as with so many of *Disgaea*'s subtler systems, it's entirely possible to play through the game without touching either.

A hub world offers a place to upgrade weapons and armour, heal teammates and explore the Item World, in which you may 'enter' a weapon or piece of armour and increase its stats by clearing levels. Weapons contain specialist characters that, once recruited, offer statistical bonuses that can be transferred between arms as you work to create the perfect arsenal.

By far the most interesting addition here is the campaign room, an abstract meta-board on which you arrange symbols of each of your characters. Units that are placed adjacent to one another are more likely to engage in combo attacks in play. As the game progresses, you earn the ability to place enhancing towers on this board, and characters within their sphere of influence enjoy statistical benefits in battles.

This is without doubt the most comprehensive entry in Nippon Ichi's once-trailblazing series, packaging its accumulated ideas alongside a clutch of innovations of its own. And yet repetition has dulled the appeal, with the complexities acting as a tall barrier to newcomers while the innovations are simultaneously too meagre to sate any but the most eager devotee. Sad, then, that a series born from explosive creativity and an eagerness to dodge the straitjacket of convention should have become a slave to its own winning formula. *Disgaea 4* may not have settled into the genre stagnation that its forebear sought to do away with, but there is a growing necessity for reinvention.

8





ABOVE It's possible to switch between the HD sprites and classic fuzzy ones. The option to switch between the Japanese and US voice acting is welcome, too.
LEFT The type of weapon that a friendly monster unit turns into during Magichange depends on their race. The stronger the monster, the stronger the weapon they become. They'll also offer special skills that are only available during Magichange

BELOW Later in the game, you earn the ability to send your characters out across PSN aboard a pirate ship, where they will do battle with other players' characters, earning money and XP while they're away



As much as it's about strategic combat, *Disgaea* is a game focused on stats, which once again sit at the heart of the gameplay, which sees players move out of the Netherworld setting and into the human world



Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One

Publisher SCE
Developer Insomniac
Format PS3
Release Out now

Insomniac's dynamic duo find themselves once again part of an ensemble piece, but unlike the recent *Move Heroes*, *All 4 One* wisely keeps the pair centre stage. As the title suggests, and the four character slots remind, this is a game designed as a co-operative experience. Synchronous switch-pulling, trapeze-style platforming and co-ordinated shooting are the pivots around which *All 4 One*'s short, varied levels hinge. After a deep-end opener which sees you and your comrades battling a tower-sized monster in a luscious sci-fi cityscape, you're sent back to square one. From scratch you level up your characters by smashing and grabbing your way across linear levels which do a good job of keeping you focused on the tasks at hand while entertaining you with a spread of eccentric enemies.

Insomniac's track record for delivering spectacle shines in environments that range from cavernous depths to vertiginous floating-island heights. A camera fixed somewhere between isometric and top-down (though it flies about the place freely to show you the money shots and deliver some sidescrolling action) appropriately associates the experience with games such as *X-Men Legends*. There's little of *Legends'* grinding depth, however, as *All 4 One* is light and breezy to the point of being shallow – a shame since it feels like it would benefit from deeper character levelling and development, a sense of personal reward from the communal efforts. While there are skins to be collected, weapons to be bought and competition in the point-scoring, it's more of a casual party game than before. Insomniac's relentless efforts to entertain mean you're barely given time to breathe as you pillage the colourful world for all the nuts and bolts you can find.

Resistance 3 underlined Insomniac's expertise in weapon and creature design, and it's a point reinforced by *All 4 One*. The team's ability to deliver silliness with a straight face is ever present – each new critter is introduced with glee, and the scripting treads the line between slapstick and pastiche perfectly.

Despite the game's brevity, however, monotony rears its head during *All 4 One*'s rigid, arcade-style levels. Ideas such as jetpacks and springboards are wrung for all they're worth, and if you and your party fail to constantly keep pace, you'll end up paying the price for your wandering ways.

Like *Lara Croft And The Guardian Of Light*, *All 4 One* takes the iconography and personality of a singleplayer brand and applies it to something different. The results are mixed, but it's a detour into new territory that will satisfy co-op players as it maintains, rather than distills, the essence of its ancestry.

6



TOOLING UP
The weapons are memorable, but as *All 4 One* progresses it can be difficult to keep up with your inventory. The weapon wheel is tiered across guns and gadgets, requiring you to be precise to pinpoint your choice. Synchronised shooting is the key to crushing bigger foes, rewarding players with a slick slow-motion payoff. Level-specific items are granted to all users in proportion to their stores of bolts, allowing everyone to stay in the game.

Singleplayer provides you with an AI Clank to help navigate the puzzles. It's a responsive and attentive sidekick that knows what to do and when, rarely messing up your efforts and even occasionally saving your life



Ace Combat: Assault Horizon

Namco's push towards more mainstream appeal for its established brands, evident in the forthcoming *Ridge Racer Unbounded*, kicks off with the latest *Ace Combat*, the first multiplatform release for the long-standing series. The action is back in the real world as opposed to the franchise's more frequent fictional setting, and the emphasis is strictly on making things go boom.

Much of what gave recent instalments strategic depth – wingman orders, a simulation approach to flight control – has been shipped out in favour of more immediate thrills. You no longer need to worry about the roll of your aircraft (although hardened players can resort to an 'original' control scheme), checkpoints are forgiving and plentiful, and there's no wrong decision in which war machine you take into battle. *Assault Horizon* is user-friendly to the point of being overgenerous, but it has to be when a game's this frenetic and fast-paced.

Dogfights are the main event, and revolve around the new Dogfight Mode. When an enemy is within range, simultaneously tapping the left and right bumpers locks you on. Once locked, you need to monitor your speed and aim as best you can, but the rest is largely taken care of (though a missile locked on to your own behind will require you to back off). This quasi-on-rails approach allows the developer to direct the flow of combat and show off its engine – capable both of city-size scale and shrapnel-shard detail – in all its glory. The payoff for a successful kill is a dazzling show of slow-mo carnage as glass sparkles like confetti and pilots plummet. When you find yourself in enemy sights, a counter manoeuvre turns the tables in a split-second, transforming some of the game's later showdowns into tense cat-and-mouse chases through the clouds. It's this basic game loop of lock-on and counter that marks *Assault Horizon* as the most accessible and invigorating entry in the series to date.

While the majority of missions involve setting the sky alight, around a third of the campaign is dedicated to mixing things up closer to the ground. There are Apache assaults on towns that play out like three-dimensional *Desert Strike* missions as you wipe out the tanks, troops and rival choppers; there are door-gunning sections that riff on *GRAW*; and there's a (drawn-out) AC-130 section that mimics *Modern Warfare*'s.

Assault Horizon sees *Ace Combat* reaching out to the west, taking unlikely inspiration from the broader spectrum of action games. It's brash and beautiful, and in looking outside its own boundaries has found fresh ways to keep you coming back to the danger zone.

8

Publisher Namco Bandai
Developer Project Aces
Format 360 (version tested), PS3
Release Out now



SIGHTS AND SOUNDS
The real-world setting allows the developer to usher some broad clichés into its narrative about NATO taking on a rogue Russian element. The globe-trotting story of (mostly) US might does take in some stunning scenery, though, from a battle over the shimmering sands of Dubai to murkier missions in Russian airspace. The musical arrangements match the locales perfectly, emphasising the dramatic tone and punctuating the action.

The fidelity of the military craft is stunning, superseded only by the game's dedication to delivering some eye-melting effects and cinematic chases. It seems a shame to tear the shiny beasts apart, but it's certainly spectacular



Dance Central 2

Among the fluffy animals and sporty avatars of Kinect's launch line-up, Harmonix's *Dance Central* gave Microsoft's motion-tracking system something it sorely needed: a heady dose of sex appeal mixed with a dash of cool. And more importantly, this achingly self-conscious hipness was tied to a use of Kinect which felt like a genuine breakthrough. Before *Dance Central*, dance games were based on pressure-sensitive mats or Wii Remotes, but this was a title that could see your body and teach you how to move it.

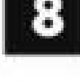
Except it didn't. Not quite. What *Dance Central* did, in reality, was show you how to dance and then rate your ability to mimic it. When it worked, it worked, but *DC*'s problems were the moves you couldn't master, the frustrating moments when you were certain your hips were swinging and your arm was raised as asked, yet the game insisted otherwise. The most significant upgrades here, then, are the ones that make it a better teacher.

Break It Down mode is where the tuition happens. This mode chops songs into their constituent parts, letting you master them piece by piece before stringing them together in the Perform It mode. It's easier than before to perfect moves that are troubling you, due to the game remembering the steps you've been struggling with and letting you focus on them one at a time. Even more helpful is a replay function that records your dancing and lets you see exactly where you've been going wrong. Be warned, however, that the fragile illusion that you look anything like the dancer onscreen is unlikely to survive even a few seconds of playback.

As welcome as these improvements are, and as much as they minimise the frustrations of *DC2*, they're not the headline upgrade. Simultaneous twoplayer modes are the major draw, and assuming you can rearrange your living room to allow for a dance hall's worth of space, it works even better than you'd have thought.

This is mainly because Harmonix understands that dancing is, above all, a chance to show off. Twoplayer Perform It is a straight-up competition to see who can match the most moves, but Dance Battles encourage showboating and fiercer competition – the former by alternating solos amongst the shared steps, the latter by introducing into routines the Free-4-All minigame, a hectic, freeform rush to nail moves floating up in batches of four before your opponent does the same.

The seamless integration of voice commands into a polished, thoughtful upgrade is Harmonix's slick finishing move. *Dance Central 2* is a typical music game sequel – it works better, offers more, yet feels fundamentally the same – but it's a practised improvement to an already eye-catching routine.


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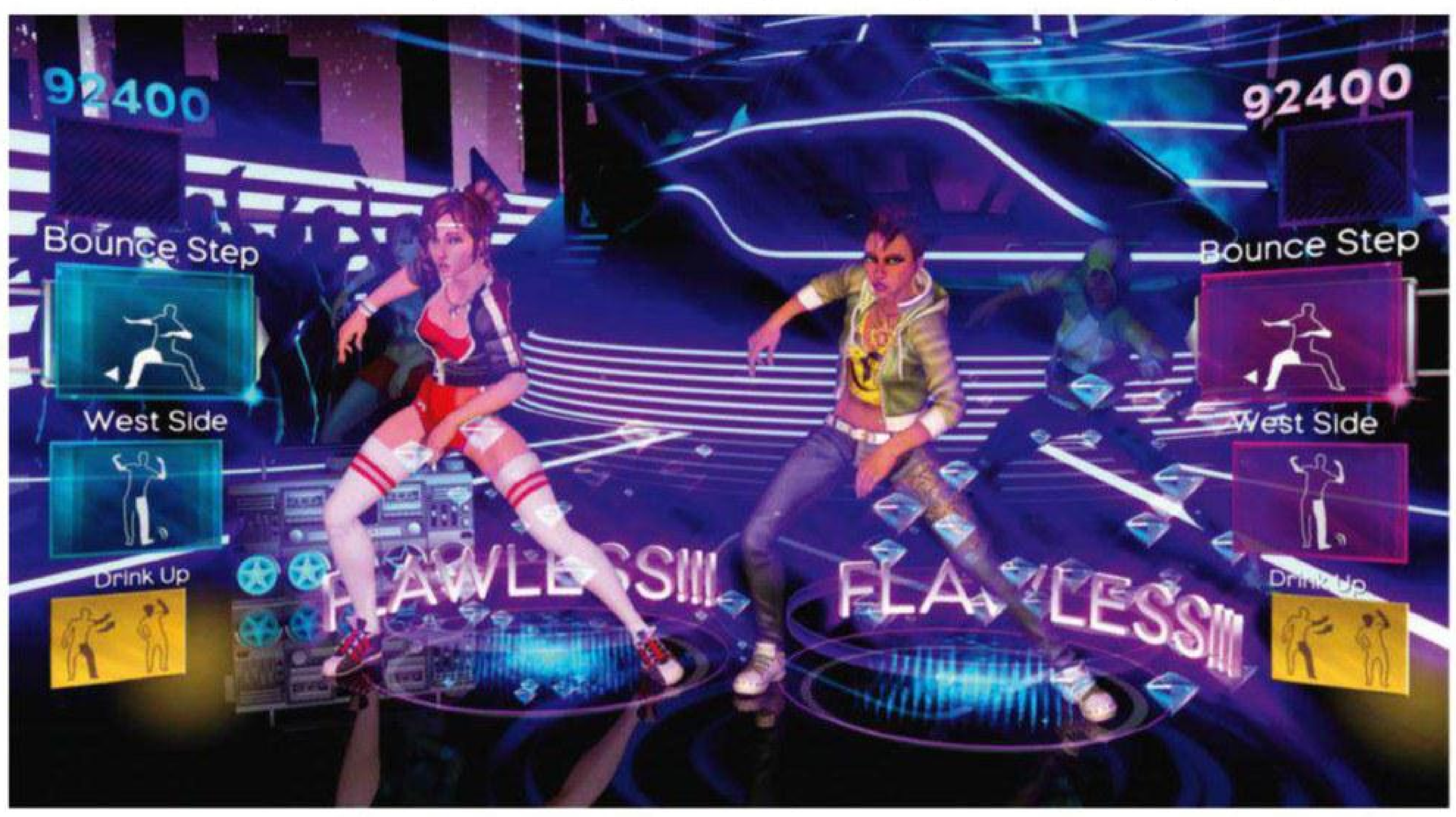
Yellow flashcards denote moves that are worth four times the points. Their inclusion seems odd – you're trying to nail every step, and the colour would be more useful if it denoted the shift from one step to the next

Publisher Harmonix Music Systems
Developer In-house
Format 360 (Kinect only)
Release Out now



BURN CENTRAL

Dance Central's fitness features amounted to little more than a calorie counter – which didn't stop the game from being one of the more enjoyable ways to work off a few pounds. *Dance Central 2*, however, offers playlists designed to be gruelling feats of endurance, and even lets you construct your own routines. While the experience is less focused than that offered by specialist fitness games, it's a reminder that – surely? – losing weight with a game console should be a little bit more enjoyable than the gym.



create

Lifting the lid on the art, science and business of making games



bit.ly/jT6wkn
The business section of **Edge**'s Web site

In this issue's People, Places, Things beginning on p130 we meet Simon Lane and Lewis Brindley, the duo responsible for *WOW* and *Minecraft* video series the Yogscast. On p132 we scale the heights of *Crackdown 2*'s Pacific City in search of a few agility orbs and the secrets to building a game around memories. *DJ Hero*'s controller takes our attention away from street crime on p134, as FreeStyleGames confesses exactly what it was up to in that garage. For Studio Profile on p136 we travel to Taiwan to meet prolific publisher and developer Gamania – virtually unknown in the west, but looking to change all that. The subject of this month's The Making Of... on p140 is *Flotilla*, the kind of balletic space-battle game that could only be improved by the inclusion of Rastafarian cats and porcine white-collar criminals. Meanwhile, on p144, we look at the state of free-to-play, the commercial model that has tempted the likes of *Lord Of The Rings Online* and, to an extent, *Eve Online* away from the traditional subscription method of making money from online games. Concluding this issue's Create are our regular columnists, with designer Tadhg Kelly (p148) discussing the perils of listening to your 'play brain', LucasArts' Clint Hocking (p150) wondering if poker can be improved upon, Tiger Style's Randy Smith (p152) telling us why he hates subtitles and cutscenes (but uses them anyway), and writer James Leach (p154) getting to the bottom of how characters work in games, from Mario to Lara Croft.





End Of Nations is an upcoming RTS developed by Petroglyph that will be published as a free-to-play game. On p144 we talk to the industry about the rise and rise of F2P



People

SIMON LANE & LEWIS BRINDLEY

How two bored science students created an online sensation

Lane (left) and Brindley's idea for the Yogscast stemmed from a collective dissatisfaction with other game videos on YouTube

It began, as the best ideas often do, as a simple exercise in self-amusement: two *World Of Warcraft* guild members, both university educated in the sciences, recording "strange and funny conversations over voice chat". A little more than three years on, **Simon Lane** and **Lewis Brindley** are now a YouTube phenomenon, with over a million subscribers following their daily videos.

The Yogscast (the title originates from a contraction of Ye Olde Goon Squad, a guild name from the pair's time posting on the forums of the Web site Something Awful) first started to attract attention during the beta testing period of *WOW*'s *Wrath Of The Lich King* expansion. "We saw a lot of people making videos about videogames," Lane explains, "including in-depth boss strategy guides for *World Of Warcraft*. We decided to make 'How to' guides that were deliberately unhelpful, and consisted of random chatter of conversations Lewis recorded that we thought were funny."

"What inspired me to start," Brindley adds, "was that there isn't a lot of entertainment out there for people like me – ie, young male gamers. There's a generation of people like me who don't watch TV. I found Simon very fun to be around as he's witty and has unique takes on things – and I knew others would enjoy it, too."

"I like to think of us as an extremely nerdy and low-budget version of The Ricky Gervais Show"

The numbers prove him right. The Yogscast channel attracts 70 to 80 million views a month, and Lane suggests that tally could yet hit 100 million in the near future. "That's an absurd amount of people watching our videos," he says. "It really shows that YouTube is competing with TV on a huge level with the youth of today."

Perhaps that, in part, explains the level of success this unlikely phenomenon has earned. Lane and Brindley have become the Internet equivalent of reality TV stars. In an age where gameshow winners are the new celebrities, it's arguably the pair's normalcy that has, in Lane's words, "propelled us to YouTube superstardom". The two share an easy rapport, and their nerdish banter is sporadically entertaining, but otherwise there's little remarkable about their videos. Yet the guilelessness of the duo's unscripted horseplay is, Brindley feels, an important factor: "We're essentially vlogging – talking to camera and joking around playing games. People watch it because they enjoy our company. It's all very natural and friendly."

It's also regular. "Usually 30 minutes every day, releasing videos around teatime," Brindley says. The element of routine is another secret of the Yogscast's success, with regular series proving the most popular. "It's something people get used to watching, and they watch for many reasons – either something to have on in the background while they are playing *World Of Warcraft* or *Minecraft*, [or to watch] on mobile devices in bed or in the kitchen, on the bus to school or during lunch breaks."

Indeed, it was the release of Mojang's nonpareil sandbox that was the catalyst for the biggest audience surge. Yogscast numbers had been steadily picking up since the *WOW: Cataclysm* beta in June 2010, precipitating a partnership with YouTube to allow revenue from Google ads, paying the pair's rent and allowing them to spend more time playing, talking and uploading. But it was the success of the Minecraft Series videos that afforded them the opportunity to make a healthy living from their content. "Typically the people who play games on YouTube do so because they're good at games and want to show off their skill or guide others to do better," Brindley says. "*Minecraft* is different to anything else out there, and it worked really well for us because it's a game that's evolving like nothing before." Indeed, the simultaneous rise of Notch's creation and the Yogscast may not be entirely coincidental, according to Brindley. "The entire game has had $0 spent on PR yet sold 3.5 million copies – I think a large part of that is due to us," he says. "We are *Minecraft*'s PR!" Lane says, adding: "I think we enjoy a symbiotic relationship with Mojang and have definitely contributed to each other's success. I'm very thankful we've done so well out of it."

Today, the Yogscast is more of a team effort, with Brindley's girlfriend, Hannah, making up a regular presenting trio. "Much like Yoko Ono, she insinuated her way into the Yogscast," Lane jokes, though her contributions have been significant, with a recent solo playthrough of *LA Noire* proving especially popular. Meanwhile, the convivial spirit of the broadcasts has seemingly extended to the growing Yogiverse community, a process which has occurred very organically, according to Lane. "[The community] is pretty much self-sustaining," he explains. "We found a couple of people who knew about Web sites and they handle the technical side, and the admins and mods [on the Yogiverse forums] have been recruited from our fanbase. People offer their services, they want to get involved, and a lot of them happen to be very talented people."

The rapid rise to fame, the community growth, the ability to embrace games and the surrounding culture while simultaneously mocking the medium – little wonder some commentators have compared the two to Penny Arcade's Tycho and Gabe. There may be no Web comic or games festival yet, but give it time. "A Yogscast: The Movie can't be far off," Lane wryly suggests. "Horne and Corden can play Lewis and me." Yet the two cite alternative influences on their work. "I like to think of us as an extremely nerdy and low-budget version of The Ricky Gervais Show," Brindley says. "The Morecambe and Wise of computer gaming... no, the Abbott and Costello of videogames," Lane adds. "The comparison has certainly been made that we work well as a double act," Brindley chips in, "because I tend to poke and prod Simon in interesting directions. I'm the one with short, fat, hairy legs and he's the funny one."

Whatever their influences, it's clear that both are in it for the long haul, even if future plans are no more ambitious than planning the (savvily chosen) games and events they'll be covering in the next few months. "We just look ahead to the big game releases," Lane explains. "Those control our schedule, so we only really have plans up to November: *Skyrim*, *Minecraft*, *Saints Row*, Minecon. Otherwise, we want to keep making content, keep entertaining people, and make them laugh." Brindley, meanwhile, is keen to take a leaf from the book of the biggest influence on their fledgling new career. "Like *Minecraft*, my attitude is to just provide a platform and see how it evolves," he says.

If and when it does, it seems it won't be thanks to outside help. "We get treated with a lot of disdain by PR companies," Brindley sighs, before adding optimistically: "I guess it will change once people realise how much of a pull we actually have." In the meantime, both seem more than happy to enjoy the trappings of fame, even as they appear slightly nonplussed by it. "A group of guys walked past us one day as we were on our way to buy Magic: The Gathering cards and one of them pointed and just yelled 'YOG!'" Lane says – possibly, in light of recent events, making a mental note not to visit OkCupid any time soon. ■



Places

PACIFIC CITY

Crackdown 2 employs an unusual tour guide: memory

Pacific City is what happens when designers don't build outwards, as with the land grab of *San Andreas*, or inwards. Instead, Realtime Worlds built upwards – and took us with it

From Crackdown 2
Developer Ruffian Games
Origin UK
Release 2010

From the top of the Agency Tower you can see the whole thing: three islands of powdery textures and grimy neon, a battleground where game mechanics regularly pound story into the floor. You don't come to Pacific City for the narrative, or for the limp set-pieces and other shreds of structure that hang upon it. You come here to jump around, to grab things and throw them, to explore and to level up your kicks while you do so. *Crackdown*'s more concerned with the moments than the arcs, and those moments are waiting on every street corner, whether you crave base jumping or base defending, car jacking or car tennis.

Pacific City can be so ingeniously aimless that the first *Crackdown* was ruled, for the most part, by a treasure hunt: a mad dash for the Agility Orbs that the designers scattered across the rooftops only when they discovered that playtesters, raised on urban sandboxes where the heights of the buildings were mere indulgences, refused to look upwards. And yet between games, something changed: the sequel had the very same orbs but, the second time around, they didn't have quite the same allure. For *Crackdown 2*, another, far more complex force guided players through the streets. What was it?

It still wasn't story. The sequel's handling of plot was little better than the original game's, even if it did try to build the lurking anti-authoritarian sentiment into something a little sharper. It wasn't the new missions, either, although the design team certainly had ambitions in this area, too. Quests that saw you jump-starting the derelict metropolis and clearing out a new breed of mutated freaks suggested that a serious attempt had been made to build encounters that deviated from the first game's gloriously nonlinear hit-list. Such efforts were doomed to failure, however. This is, after all, a series that rejects traditional content like an unnecessary skin graft. *Crackdown*'s about geography, not structure, which explains why its best levels are neighbourhoods and its best set-pieces are buildings.

It may also help to explain why those glowing collectables had lost their starring role. In the hands of Realtime Worlds, Pacific City had been a brilliant place to explore if you stepped away from the plot: the fun of the game was following that chain of orbs until you'd visited every borough and climbed every chimney. With a brutal production schedule, Ruffian couldn't hope to match that kind of intricacy. Without the time to build an entirely new playground, it took an unusual risk. It went back to the original city – and then trashed the place.



The wingsuit is one of *Crackdown 2*'s strongest ideas, allowing you to drop on to a roof whenever you see the chance for chaos

In doing so, it created something unique. Videogames have revisited locations before, but rarely return to the exact same geometry. By sticking so closely to the first game's map and simply roughing up the edges, Ruffian got to explore what happens when you build a game around memory, letting the lingering recollections of your previous escapades, rather than the insistent chattering of new missions, pull you in. Pacific City became host to a game about rediscovery: an adventure guided by a basic desire to see what's happened in your absence.

Crackdown's best levels are neighbourhoods and its best set-pieces are buildings

So you go to that observatory nestled into the cliffs just to see if it's survived. There was once a golden globe here you could use to hit people for an Achievement. Now the dome of the building is caved in, the windows are broken, and there's a Freak Breach waiting to erupt in the forecourt. You go to the docks, and find the place barricaded with corrugated metal while a liner on which you once fought a boss rusts in the dock. The rooftop of Shai-Gen's highest skyscraper – you maybe drove an upgraded SUV up the side – now rests in the centre of the nearby arcade, while, over in Volk territory, the cog monument at Hope Plaza has been pulled from its stand and lies in the dirt.

So much changed, and yet Ruffian keeps a few precious elements intact. The clumsy brilliance of the traversal hasn't been unnecessarily refined, then, while surface detail is still ruthlessly sacrificed in order to power the fearsome draw distance. And at the centre of the city, Agency Tower still awaits those in search of the ultimate challenge. New fiction may have turned it into a glorified gun, but it remains a marvel to scramble up. Forget missions: getting to the top of the tower is still the true Pacific City endgame, and that final leap from the roof is the only true way of showing your dominance over the ruined landscape.

It's a fascinating journey, and one that has seen this playground became a rather melancholic place, despite the cheery screams of the freaks exploding under your tyres, and the Quacker mines that send bracing shockwaves through the skyscraper canyons. Perhaps the new atmosphere makes sense. After all, the Pacific City of *Crackdown 2* is the perfect place to explore the dark ravages of time. It's a landscape that's been squeezed by the clock, subject to the passing of an in-game decade, and left shattered by a thankless real-world development schedule.

You don't expect places in games to change. Games move on, and a series may build new cities, but the earlier ones are still there, intact, trapped on their old discs. *Crackdown* doesn't play by those rules, just like it doesn't play by the rules of cutscenes, narrative progression or empathetic characters. Whispers of your own half-forgotten hilarities lend the place shape, and playful ghosts direct the carnage. ■



Things

DJ HERO'S TURNTABLE CONTROLLER

From wooden prototype to fabulous one-of-a-kind music peripheral

It may be hard to detect from the sleek lines of the finished unit, but *DJ Hero*'s controller was first lashed together in a garage

Had FreeStyleGames pursued its original vision for the project that eventually became *DJ Hero*, the game's turntable controller – perhaps the most complex and gratifying entry-level music game peripheral to date – simply would not exist.

Following the release of its first original game, 2006's *B-Boy*, the studio dreamed up a Wii-exclusive social/party experience that touched on four pillars of hip-hop culture: graffiti, b-boying, MCing and DJing. But when it came time to use the Wii Remote to scratch records and spray colourful designs, one element stood far above the rest. "As we investigated gameplay, we found that the DJ part was really, really exciting and fun," says **Jamie Jackson**, creative director of FreeStyleGames. "The three other components were a bit superfluous."

Spurred on by the success of the early *Guitar Hero* entries, FreeStyleGames refocused its efforts on a dedicated, multiplatform turntablism sim. Though brand and publisher alike would later link the titles, the team initially skewed the interface to take after *Guitar Hero*'s in an effort to either compete against or join the series. But Activision didn't bite on the pitch; Jackson says the publisher expressed interest, but wanted to focus on nurturing its axe-shredding series. Instead, the developer signed with Vivendi Games to turn what was then known as *Superstar DJ* into a reality.

Unsurprisingly, the sleek plastic peripheral released in late 2009 is a far cry from early iterations, with the notable rough edges buffed out through rigorous prototyping and focus testing. What would one day sit in the laps of would-be DJs began in Jackson's garage, crafted primarily from wood.

"We were making peripherals in my garage out of all manner of toys, controls and bits of wood. Just crazy stuff; we got this children's toy that let you make [clay] shapes and bake them to become solid. We made switches and faders," Jackson says. Programmers designed the play mechanics, and the team reconvened regularly to mash the elements together. "A coder would be writing a piece of prototype code," he adds, "and I'd be in my garage in the middle of winter gluing this strange thing together."

Despite the primitive origins, Jackson – who worked in product and vehicle design before videogames – looks back fondly on those days: "It was kind of like game development mixed with product development and making music. It was probably the most fun I've had in this industry." Yet the original design, which resembled a disc-based CDJ unit with a centre-mounted platter and buttons on the sides, fell short. "It didn't feel right," Jackson concedes. "Something was wrong with it."



Prototypes show differing positions of buttons and switches, along with refinement of the all-important disc arrangement

"We were making peripherals in my garage out of all manner of toys, controls and bits of wood"

That changed when one designer mocked up the idea of mounting the three coloured buttons atop the vinyl-like platter. Initially derided as "wacky" and "mental", Jackson says, a functional prototype shuttered speculation and proved a eureka moment. From there, the layout and UI design came together, and FreeStyleGames hired a local product design engineer to develop prototype controllers. Further tweaking shelved elements including a self-centring crossfader switch (like a *Guitar Hero* strum bar) and a platter that moved only 45 degrees in either direction, though a publishing shift would change the project's fate once more.

With the merger of Activision and Vivendi Games in 2008, *Superstar DJ* was one of the few existing Vivendi products to stay afloat; and later in the year, the newly rebranded Activision Blizzard acquired FreeStyleGames. With its game now slated to extend the *Guitar Hero* franchise, the studio passed all of its existing efforts to Activision's plastic-guitar-designing RedOctane division, which had the experience to bring the prototype to market cost-effectively.

However, the influence of an external design agency hired by Activision provided one last obstacle. "They wanted to do something which to us didn't feel like a DJ deck," Jackson explains. "We felt that the first peripheral had to look like something that was iconic within DJing, kind of like the first *Guitar Hero* guitar." The studio's preferred design made it to market.

DJ Hero launched to very strong reviews, many of which praised the turntable itself for its slick, compact design and the way the myriad inputs – including the spinning platter, buttons, crossfader switch and effects dial – worked together in unison to create the sensation of blending popular licensed tracks. Sequel *DJ Hero 2* arrived one year later and enhanced the freestyle input options while using the exact same peripheral (Jackson: "We didn't believe in forcing anyone to buy a new controller").

Neither game matched the lofty sales totals notched by hit rhythm franchises just a year or two earlier, though, and the series is currently inactive – ideas on ice include an expert mode that lets two platters connect to one control unit for a significantly enhanced challenge. Jackson hopes to one day revisit the brand, and allow users to create and share mashed-up tracks with friends, but says economic concerns are a significant obstacle. "We're going to have to take a real shift in thinking about how music gets licensed, because that's the blocker at the moment," he admits. Until that happens, the plastic turntables will continue spinning in the hearts, minds and living rooms of the series' most devoted fans, still waiting for a fresh beat to drop. ■



STUDIO PROFILE

Gamania

How Taiwan's **master of multimedia** and massively **multiplayer games is planning to take its** wares west

1 Browser MMOG *Soul Captor* is a cutesy patchwork of eastern myths and legends. 2 *Warrior Of Dragon* feels like an eastern riff on *Diablo*. 3 *Core Blaze*'s co-op beast battles tap in to *Monster Hunter*'s market. 4 Hero 108 has had more success as a cartoon than a game so far. 5 *Langrisser Schwarz* has a history dating back to Sega's Mega Drive. 6 *Web Koihime Musou* is based on an erotic retelling of The Romance Of The Three Kingdoms. 7 *Web Power Dolls* reincarnates a long-lived PC title. 8 *Dream Drops* takes inspiration from fairytales. 9 *Tiara Concerto* is set in a world where magic and music are the same thing

Gamania, the largest publisher you've probably never heard of, may well soon be hard to avoid. So far, the Taiwanese company has concentrated on cultivating audiences in the east, cutting its teeth on operating existing MMOGs for its domestic market, before launching a slew of self-developed titles across Asia. It's been doing rather well. Well enough that it can afford TV advertising of a prominence rarely seen here in the west; well enough that it has sprouted offices in Hong Kong, China, Japan, Korea, the US and Europe; well enough that its titles are routinely targeted by hackers on an industrial scale and that the company has received the dubious honour of having a virus named after it (see p14). And now it's set its sights on breaking into the western market, becoming a global multimedia entertainment company with a diverse raft of creations making excursions to PC, mobile and tablet, as well as TVs and cinema screens. With its ambition set at such a trajectory, its webgaming hub, social platform and integrated payment system seem almost par for the course.





Albert Liu (left) is Gamania's founder and CEO, while chief strategy officer William Chen is closely involved with the company's expansion into Europe from its Taiwan home

Albert Liu founded the company in 1995 under the shortlived name of FullSoft, originally with the intent of servicing his own hardcore PC strategy tastes. "I guess we've diverged from the template," he chuckles. At 41, he's a young CEO, and a man of easygoing charm and an avuncular, relaxed management style which seems to have permeated the ranks of his growing empire. If not a direct result of the company's home city of New Taipei, then Gamania's affable but ambitious corporate character is certainly a reflection of this place: cosmopolitan and welcoming, with a bristling, ever-rising skyline and sense of busy innovation partly fuelled by a cheery disregard for planning regulation. Gamania's HQ occupies a multitude of floors across a modest skyscraper, itself stacked closely against a series of heaving flyovers that seem to be trying to climb on top of one another like mating centipedes. Inside we find a staff-only gym and cafeteria; a sophisticated QA observation deck, replete with the latest eye-tracking tools; a company-sponsored pro-gaming team, The Gama Bears, busy practising *StarCraft II*; and a server room sculpted to resemble the Kirk-era Starship Enterprise's bridge.

But this success was not made overnight. Though the company's first game, a singleplayer RPG, was well-received, Gamania struggled to expand its production in the subsequent years. It was only in 1999 that things turned around, with the unprecedented pan-Asian sales of a sim called *Convenience Store*. From there, Gamania was able to snatch up the Taiwanese operating rights for the hugely popular *Lineage* and *Maple Story*, and to develop its own IP. The company has a catholic approach to its creative output, allowing its internal studios to nurture projects which may never turn into games at all, parlaying the ideas into whatever form best suits them or publishing them across multiple media. Its animation arm, dubbed the Creative Studio, has already had some international success with a series of painfully charming Kipling-esque fables called Mig Said and the crossmedia kids' cartoon Hero 108. Gamania recently unveiled a partnership with an external studio to form digital animation company Two Tigers – its first offering is Jade Armor, a comedy action series with animals that transform into robots, and a sense of CG caricature that strikes out towards the west-friendly aesthetic of Pixar.

> The west may still be making its mind up about the free-to-play market, but in Asia it's a done deal



***Convenience Store* was Gamania's breakout hit and, it's claimed, was at one point the most popular game in Asia**



Founded 1995
Employees 1,700
Key staff Albert Liu (founder and CEO), William Chen (chief strategy officer), Karl Hsu (chief information officer)
URL www.gamania.com
Selected softography *Eclipse, Convenience Store, Bright Shadow, Zodiac Online, Hero 108*
Current projects *Core Blaze, Langrisser Schwarz, Tiara Concerto, Dream Drops, Warrior Of Dragon*

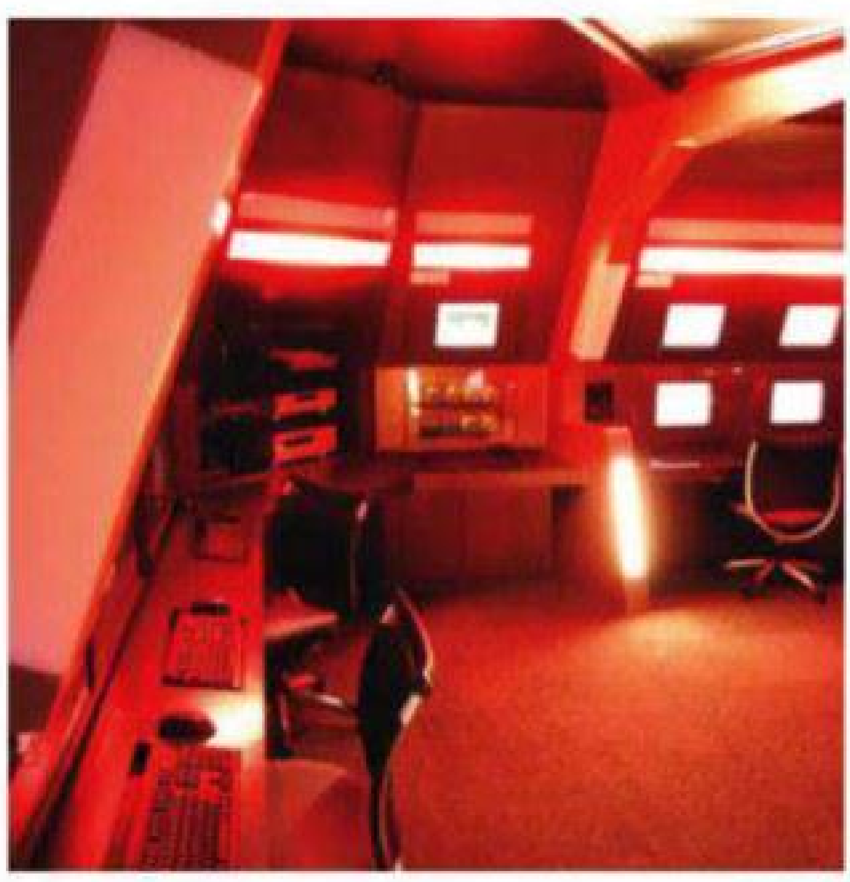
"We are not only selling games but selling stories," Liu says. "[Our studios] have full autonomy in choosing which IP to work with, but they always have the idea in mind that, if they build up this new IP as an animation or a movie, the maximum possibility for it in the Taiwanese market will be as an online game."

Though there's time to raise a glass to Gamania's animation output, the online games take centre stage at the company's inaugural gaming convention, held at the hip Huashan Creative Park in downtown Taipei. It's a lavish affair of glitzy stands, elaborate presentations, copious booze and dancing girls which seems as much for the benefit of the company's own staff as it is a showcase to test out the reception of its upcoming titles among international press and investors. Other publishers are tightening their belts at this time of economic woe, but Gamania's extravagance suggests there's still money to be made – and the company's adamant that it's in free-to-play games. The west may still be making its mind up about the prospects of the free-to-play market, but in Asia it's a done deal.

"Asian players are now very used to free downloads and the free-to-play model," Liu says. "If you tried to go back and ask them to pay $50 for a box and then a subscription fee on the top then they wouldn't do that. The success of *Maple Story*, which we published here, changed the rules not just for Taiwan but for the eastern market as a whole. I don't think there's any way back from free-to-play now, at least in the east."

But what does that mean for Gamania's chances as it launches its games in the west? The inter-cultural appeal of its titles aside, the cost of launching a game, and the revenue you receive back, differ wildly between regions, as chief strategy officer **William Chen** later tells us. Taiwan has a small market in comparison to gargantuan







Like many studios, Gamania's HQ has its own gym and cafe. But how many offer the bridge of the Enterprise? Such are the stylings of its server room, which lies behind a steel door

territories like China, but it's a profitable one: gamers here are willing to part with up to £25 per month. Marketing is also relatively inexpensive given the level of audience engagement. "Compare it to a market like China," Chen says. "Before you've even reached any awareness [there] you've spent two million US dollars, versus Taiwan where you spent maybe $500,000."

There are other challenges in Europe, as Chen outlines: the market is very fragmented, thanks to its many languages, and there's a console bias in countries such as the UK and France. While PC specifications are unlikely to be a problem, the major stumbling block is Europe's woeful broadband penetration. And of course there's the extremely non-trivial issue of localisation. The company has been burnt before in its efforts to court the west: cartoon property Hero 108 had been developed with a view to release across multiple territories and multiple media, meshing the animistic mythologies and martial arts of the east with a thickly lined, iconic style that fits well with Cartoon Network's western output. As an animation it took hold with a young audience. The game, meanwhile, tanked across all territories. Different members of Gamania's management offer different reasons. Liu holds that the divergent production cycles of animation and game made it difficult to maintain a parity across the two developments, ultimately ending in two mismatched products. The TV show appealed to the very young, but the MMOG proved too complex for that audience.

"The design of a free-to-play game should not make the non-paying players feel like they're losing out"

Chen, meanwhile, points to Hero 108 as a bump in the road of localisation. The team was so intent on creating a global product that it ended up with a transcultural compromise that satisfied no one. "At some point during development, [Hero 108] lost its unique quality because we wanted to respond so literally to the feedback [from each region]," Chen says. "This is a huge lesson for Gamania. It's really hard to develop a game that appeals equally across all territories. Perhaps *World Of Warcraft* is one, but that has accomplished something that almost no one else has. *WOW* is its own case and doesn't tell you much about how other games will perform – and even in Asia, that is very popular in one or two markets and not doing quite so well in others."

Hero 108's MMOG has been pulled back into development for the time being, with a mobile and tablet minigame collection launched to tide fans over. Consequently, Chen's dogma for the international fate of future products is 'if the shoe fits'. "We have a lot of in-house titles in the pipeline, but not every title there is going to launch in Europe and the US," he says. "Or we might just publish one in the UK, or France."

Part of the reason we're here in Taipei, in fact, is to test the European prospects of Gamania's portfolio. Which of these five games will reach the UK, and in what form, will be a subject of much further deliberation for the company, but it's clear from our hands-on that certain prospects stand a better chance than others (see 'Party of five'). *Core Blaze*, an MMOG with a heavy whiff of *Monster Hunter* about it, is Gamania's greatest hope for western triumph and it's easy to see why. This is among the most substantial action games we've seen offered via free-to-play delivery, and, as with most of the titles available to play at the convention, its mechanics are surprisingly deep and well-considered, with a dramatic and intelligent interplay between classes. In all the games it produces, Gamania hopes to make money from item and weapon purchases but, at least in the case of *Core Blaze*, the company says that there will be little you can buy that will be better than what you can craft yourself for free.

"We don't like the idea of a 'pay to win' game in general," Liu says. "We try to let the paying players have a little more fun – items that don't look exactly the same as other players', perhaps, or have a few extra features or functions, or maybe they can just get that item a little quicker. But we believe fundamentally that the design of a free-to-play game should not make the non-paying players feel like they're losing out."

In the small but engaged Taiwanese market, Gamania may be assured of making its money back, but, we wonder, how willing are European players to part with their cash for items and weapons? We ask Liu what sort of player figures the firm would want from *Core Blaze*'s potential European release.

"It's a difficult question," he says after a little prodding. "If I say a figure and put the numbers too high, we look arrogant and over-confident. If I put them too low, it looks like we don't have faith in our game. We have a rough estimate that successful MMOGs in Europe operate with playerbases of around 50,000, so that's what we would take as a target to try and beat."

Not all of Gamania's titles have quite as clear a route to European success as *Core Blaze* – but not for issues of quality so much as divergent cultural tastes when it comes to the aesthetic and narrative. Mechanically, there's much that translates between territories: though the structure and feature set varies among them, Gamania's upcoming titles all share interesting combat mechanics with well-defined powers and a rich class interplay. It's certainly more than you might expect for an asking price of exactly nothing, and with Gamania's creative arm homing in on styles with international appeal it can only be a matter of time before the company meshes an animation property that truly transcends cultural boundaries with a game of potent mechanics and prolonged engagement. With some setbacks and learning experiences under its belt, Gamania no longer looks like a company trying to run before it can walk; Chen predicts that it will take between three and five years to establish the brand in Europe. Once it has, as with the advent of free-to-play itself, there may be no going back. ■

Party of five

Hands-on with Gamania's quintuplet of upcoming titles

Core Blaze is touted as the favourite of Gamania's titles to reach western soil, and we'd have to agree. While all the games here are poured from a thirdperson MMOG mould, *Core Blaze* has wrestled the conventions of the genre – customisable action buttons, mana bars and cooldowns – into a gamepad-controlled brawler of some sophistication, with no small debt to the likes of *Monster Hunter*. Movement is responsive and the characters agile, with split-second dives and rolls a much more significant feature of combat than in many MMOGs, thanks to meaningful collision detection.

This gives the action sets of its four classes (or 'weapon styles', since players are free to flit between them) a lot of room to establish their distinct purpose. The dual-blade class offers sweeping forward blows, pirouette attacks and a space-clearing 'vacuum attack' which sends your knives into an orbit around you. The Shadow Dance, meanwhile, allows you to chain seven dash attacks, zipping about the battlefield. The choice of the sword-and-shield class has a similarly colourful selection of powers, with a mighty counter-smash and a boomerang to offset the defensive close-quarters move-set. Archers and greatswords fit out the other two classes with equal variety, and all players have access to items like bombs, traps and pots of oil. Our final battle bore many similarities to *Monster Hunter*, with a gargantuan, winged ice-panther having a weakness to shock-bombs which could be exploited to disrupt its attack pattern. Environments invite repeated exploration, changing with time and weather to reveal new secrets and enemies.

It's a handsome thing, too, with Epic's Unreal engine painting glistening ice caves and lush jungles. The other titles we take a look at are geared to lower-spec machines, but aren't short of gaudy particle effects and keenly targeted aesthetics. *Langrisser Schwartz* is thought to be the second European hopeful – and its splashy, chaotic battles, lightning pace and elaborate levelling system recommend it, even if the somewhat garbled mythology of the *Langrisser* series has little recognition here in the west.

Continuing Gamania's penchant for random-sounding two-word titles is *Tiara Concerto*, which we're told is geared toward a female demographic. Despite its overtly frilly aesthetic, this is no casual game; combat puts a good deal of power in the hands of a skilled player, allowing you to juggle attacks that propel your character in and out of close quarters. Making a good deal of inter-class cooperation, this is, for our money, Gamania's most immediately enjoyable title after *Core Blaze*.



Dream Drops, meanwhile, has an obvious hook for a western audience in its astute and colourful pastiche of Anglo-Germanic fairytales, but the rest of the game is hard to judge – the demo seemed to have enemy AI turned off and we found there was little point soloing as the healer class (which takes the unusual form of a pastry chef). Finally, *Warrior Of Dragon* offers a *Diablo*-style perspective and pace, but skewed more toward MMOG combat than Blizzard's hack'n'slash immediacy. With guild-versus-guild and an inter-factional warfare component this is quite the weighty package, but its presentation may prove too esoteric for western audiences.



***Monster Hunter*-style battler *Core Blaze* (top), the music-themed *Tiara Concerto* (centre) and fairytale mashup *Dream Drops* (above)**



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THE MAKING OF...

Flotilla

Toucan stowaways, Rasta cats and epic orbital battles: Flotilla proved that even the small can think big

Flotilla's 3D playing field was a conceptual leap for some players. There's no up or down in zero-gravity

Publisher Blendo Games
Developer In-house
Format 360, PC
Origin US
Release 2010

Brendon Chung knows a lot about failure. The Californian game designer of one-man indie studio Blendo Games has whole hard drives full of his screw-ups.

"Honestly, I fail like 90 per cent of the time," he confesses. "My hard drive has all these aborted foetuses of games that are just bad, broken and not even close to looking done. The other ten per cent of the time you hit something that's pretty ugly and terrible, but you see some potential there and you file it away, hopefully to bring it back and use it in some fashion in a later project. Overall, though, it's very discouraging."

You might expect him to sound glum about it, but Chung's soft West Coast drawl doesn't betray the slightest hint of disappointment. Quite the opposite – he sounds like a guy who's living his dream. His space strategy game *Flotilla*, Blendo's first paid-for release, emerged from failure to find success. Chung's learnt, as Samuel Beckett once advised, to "Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

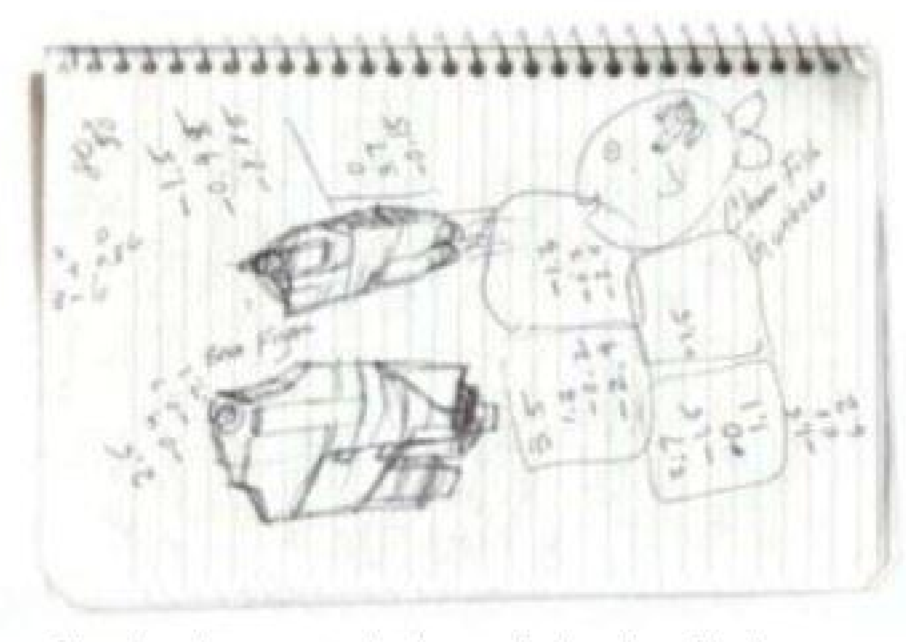
Although it's a small outing, *Flotilla* is a majestic 3D space opera full of quirky characters, surreal decision trees and cautious spaceship-to-spaceship skirmishes. It was also the game that embodied Chung's full-circle journey from a teenage modder to a job at a major publisher and back to working solo. And it was all from a prototype he'd almost given up on.

"The confluence of technology and digital distribution means a golden age for indie development"

When he was a kid growing up in San Gabriel, Chung loved firstperson shooters. Not just because he enjoyed blasting monsters, aliens and demons – although that was undeniably part of it – but because he could mod them. "During mornings before school I'd make my own little maps for *Doom* or *Quake*, then at college I taught myself basic programming."

Despite his family's scepticism ("They thought it was just playing with games. It's hard to understand when all you're seeing is a guy running around a room shooting monsters with a gun"), he knew he was honing skills that would lead to a career. When he got his first professional job straight out of college as a level designer at Pandemic Studios in 2004, he felt vindicated. Even after he'd ostensibly made it, however, it was hard to stop being a bedroom coder. In his spare time he continued working on freemium games and personal projects. Slowly, the hard drive filled up with more ill-fated foetuses.

Among them was *Space Piñata*, a turn-based 2D game featuring battleships fighting each other in space. "It was extremely similar to what *Flotilla* ended up becoming," he says of the early prototype. "You ordered where you want these giant battleships to move, you pressed the button and your opponent did the same thing. It was simultaneous turn-based; you saw whose missiles hit who and what ships exploded. It was fun but it was just something I'd done in my spare time after hours working at Pandemic. I didn't do anything with it because I had a full-time job."



Chung's early concept sketches are in keeping with the game's feel, not to mention its strange animal obsession

That all changed in November 2009 when the EA-owned Pandemic closed its doors. Around 200 staff were laid off a week before Thanksgiving, and Chung was among them. While some vented their frustrations by taking baseball bats and crowbars to a company printer (and posting their rage on YouTube), the designer felt no anger, just excitement. "There was adrenaline pumping through my veins," he says, remembering his final walk across the company car park, carrying his box of possessions. "That afternoon, I started coding *Flotilla*."

Four giant battleships dance around each other in the depths of space. They bank, turn and pitch in a languid, carefully choreographed ballet. Missiles streak across the vast emptiness, flaring as they glance off the armoured sides of these lumbering leviathans. It's a majestic and surprisingly melancholic take on space combat.

It's hard not to draw comparisons between *Flotilla*'s slow-burning battles and Stanley Kubrick's celebrated docking sequence in 2001: A Space Odyssey, in which a shuttle approaches a rotating space station high above the Earth. Kubrick scored it with the shimmering violins and piping French horns of The Blue Danube, and Strauss's seductive composition became an ironic commentary on the loveless space waltz of these cold machines.

In *Flotilla*, Chung pulls off a similar synthesis of action and music, the piano melodies of Chopin's 'Raindrop' Prelude giving the battles an emotional undercurrent. "I wanted *Flotilla* to be the anti-testosterone-fuelled, action-packed action game. I wanted it to be fairly sombre. You're travelling by yourself across space, everything's desolate, and the universe is a pretty hostile place full of pirates and crazy people. The music was supposed to give it a tragic feel."

Set against an orange 3D starfield littered with the odd cluster of meteors and space junk, *Flotilla*'s battles between crude polygonal spaceships are complex engagements that require careful strategising. Here, space warfare is like a submarine battle, slow-moving beam frigates and ponderous, large-bellied battleships crawling through deep space in search of an advantage.

With vessels sporting armour along their fronts, sides and upper surfaces, going in all guns blazing isn't an option (or at least not one with much life expectancy). Instead the fights require careful positioning and cautious, patient movement. Flanking enemies is the key to success; 'orbital battleship maneuvers' is the tagline.

"*Flotilla* is a game for a niche audience. You have to fiddle with this X, Y, Z environment – you have to rotate your ship on the pitch axis, the roll axis and the yaw axis," Chang notes. Making sure your armoured side is facing an enemy is key, and it gives the game's celestial battles a deeper strategy than you might expect.

It's also conceptually hard to grasp, with the advice that "there is no up in space" (a nod to classic sci-fi novel Ender's Game) too much for some players to wrap their heads around.

"Playtesting went pretty poorly," Chung confesses. "A lot of the feedback I got was that I should simplify it down to a 2D plane – it would make the game much easier to get up and running, and easier to appeal to a much wider audience. But for me the beauty of indie development is in doing stuff that doesn't have mass appeal." The irony that *Flotilla*'s prototype had begun life in 2D didn't escape him.

The other issue was the game's brevity. Your character begins the game with just seven months to live, and behind the scenes the clock is ticking. After 20 minutes or so of voyaging across a randomly generated star map, fighting space pirates and trading with crippled pink flamingos, your commander's toes will curl up. Death and failure are inevitable.

"I wanted to make a quick, bite-sized, procedurally generated story," Chang explains. "You play, it ends, and you either play again or go and do something else." Like Chopin's Preludes – deliberately short, elegantly formed pieces of music that irked some critics into bemoaning their length, as if shortness and perfection were mutually exclusive – *Flotilla*'s time limit met with complaints from some players.

"Naively, I didn't expect that. The feedback was: 'Oh my goodness, I can't save my game. I can't visit every planet in the universe!'" But since an upside of indie game development is its nimbleness, Chung patched the game adding in a new hardcore singleplayer mode that extended the commander's life expectancy and complemented the short singleplayer campaign, skirmish and splitscreen modes.

As short as it may be in its original state, *Flotilla* is a game of two halves, shifting between the melancholic tragedy of its battles and the wacky humour that emerges as you explore an absurd, randomly generated galaxy populated by a menagerie of sentient beasts.

When you're not locked in space battles, you pilot your ship between planets and a tree of choices pops up. You might encounter a pair of white-collar porcine criminals asking for help, or Rastafarian cats who appear in a burst of dub. Joining a karaoke contest might win you an extra ship or power-ups like a faster fire rate. You might even have to choose what to do about a bunch of baby yetis that have chewed through your ship's wiring: defang them or blast them out the airlock?

Whatever you decide in these encounters, you can be sure there will be consequences. "One of my mandates for myself was to make a procedural way for every player to have their own unique adventure through space," Chung explains. "So I chose this Choose Your Own Adventure branching storyline in space. Whenever I play RPGs they tend to backload all their crucial decisions to the end of the game – the latter part is where you get the more interesting world-changing events like kill or save the king. I thought it would be interesting if the player was given these critical universe-changing decisions early in the campaign."

From a player's perspective, the drive to discover what crazy stuff will happen next is what propels you through the game. You fight against the clock to experience as much as possible before you either die in battle or your seven-month life expectancy expires (and your game with it).

For Chung, though, the nonlinear storytelling was only half successful. "The results were interesting but I'm not sure if I'd do it again," he says. "On the development side it's extremely taxing. You have to create tons of content and even when you do create a good amount of content it's never enough – you'll exhaust it so quickly regardless of what you do." It also led to his biggest regret in the game. "Foolishly, I didn't make the Choose Your Own Adventure events modifiable by players. I would have really liked to have seen what cool events people would have added to the game."

Could many players have matched the distinctive comedy in *Flotilla*'s story? Probably not. Certainly Chung, a fan of classic LucasArts games like *Day Of The Tentacle*, believes indie designers are better off taking a quixotic, quirky approach to their stories. "When I develop my games I try not to go head to head with other games. I'd never make a military firstperson shooter because for me to try and compete with *Call Of Duty* or *Battlefield 3* would be disastrous. It'd be a bloodbath – and all the blood would be mine."

It's also a good way for an indie developer to get away with lower production values. "When I knew I was making a space game, I realised it would normally involve meeting a bunch of aliens. But because I know there are far more talented artists out there who could develop much better-looking aliens than I could ever do in my life, I figured I'd go in a completely different direction: a rhino in a battleship or a toucan hitchhiker just seemed really funny to me."

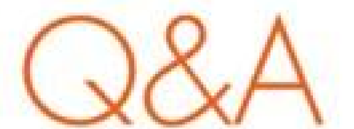
Flotilla is Blendo Games' great success story. But it's also something else, a story about how game development has changed recently. Chung's own personal journey from bedroom modder to studio staffer to micro-developer is indicative of a much bigger shift that's being played out in the videogame development world. The rise of the indie game market has let game development rediscover its roots, the early days when one coder working in seclusion could be an auteur.

Looking back at his own journey and that day in November 2009 when Pandemic closed its doors, Chung believes the timing – for him, at least – couldn't have been better. "I've really gone back to where I began. When I started game development it was just me in my bedroom making maps for *Doom* and *Quake*. But now game development has gone full circle, too. All the conditions are there for independents. I don't think you would have seen this in 1995 or so. The Internet wasn't as big as it is today. There weren't as many free programming tools or free art tools. It's this confluence of how technology has evolved and how digital distribution has evolved that's made this possible right now. It's a golden age for indie development."

Although he's coy about numbers, Chung says that *Flotilla* was a big enough success to catapult him from being an unemployed game designer burning through his savings to being a full-time indie developer.

"It was more than enough to support me for quite a while. Steam was my saviour in this case. Just one good Steam sale was enough to keep me going for a healthy amount of time. That platform works really well for indie development."

He's proved that failure can breed success. So does his family finally see the value of all that time he spent in his bedroom as a kid? "Oh, yes," he laughs. "It took them 30 years to figure it out." ■



Brendon Chung
Founder, Blendo Games

Do you do everything at Blendo Games?
I wear all the hats. I do all the programming, the design, the art. The only things I don't do are the sound effects and the music. I also have a friend that helps out with the PR and marketing stuff.

You worked at Pandemic for five years – how useful was that experience?
I was a level designer on the *Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers* game and a level designer on *Lord Of The Rings: Conquest*. Working at Pandemic gave me the framework to know how programming, design and audio all fit together to make a fully functioning game.

Do you miss the office environment now that you're working from home?
It is lonely. The one thing I miss is being able to visit my co-workers and seeing little demos of what they're making. I miss that.

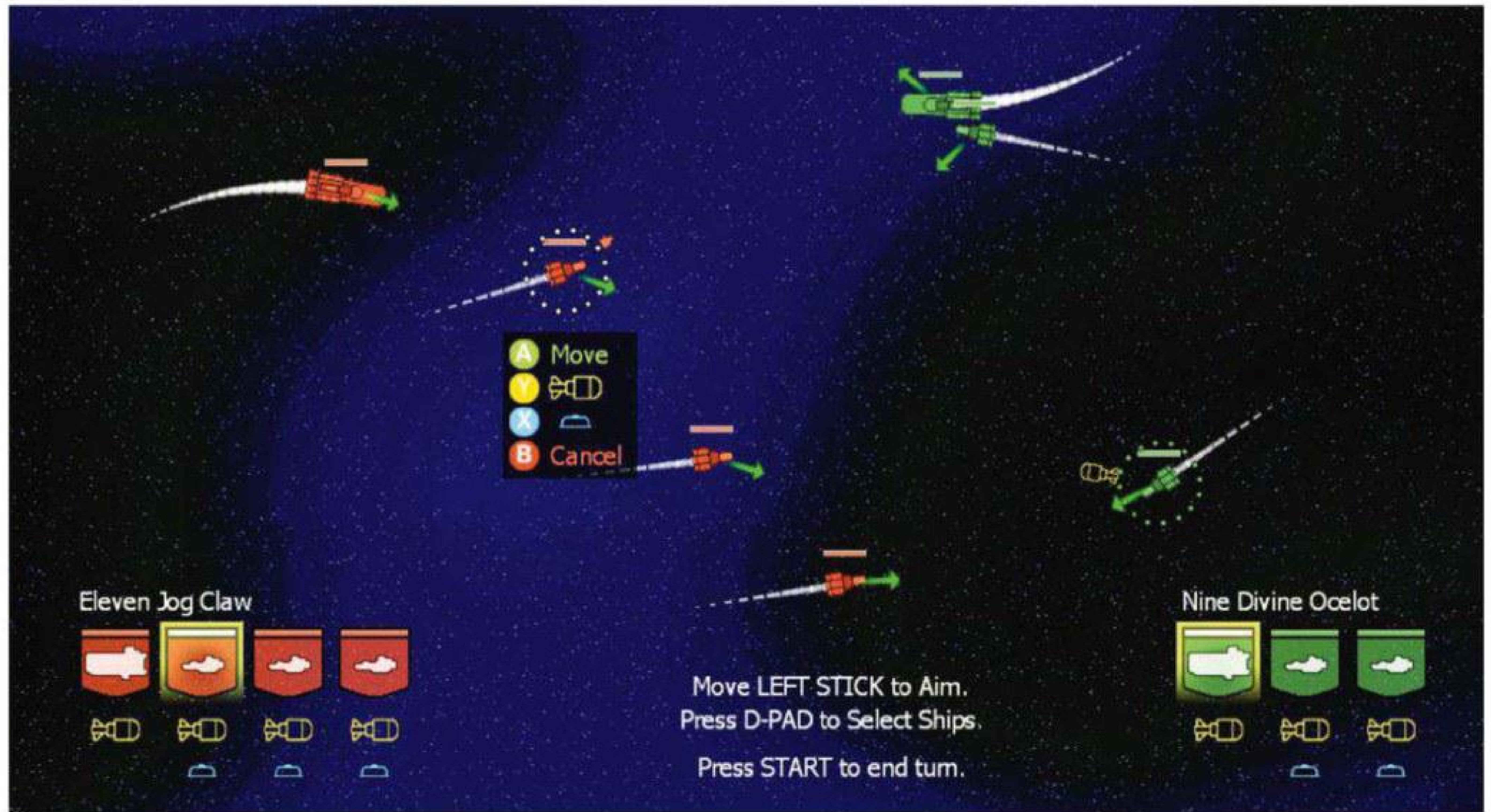
As an indie, do you get a lot of fan feedback?
In *Flotilla* I put in a feature called Report-A-Bug so that people can type a message while they're playing a game instead of when it ends. It sends me a little email. I didn't expect anyone to use it. Who's going to take time out of their game to send a message that seemingly goes into a black hole – who knows if it gets read or not? But it's great. A lot of people use it and every week I see what interesting things people are writing and what I can put into my next patch.





Space Piñata (below), Chung's 2D prototype, had many similarities to *Flotilla*. Sadly, its mines didn't translate into the finished 3D game. Meanwhile, Chung kept track of dev tasks on index cards (left and above)



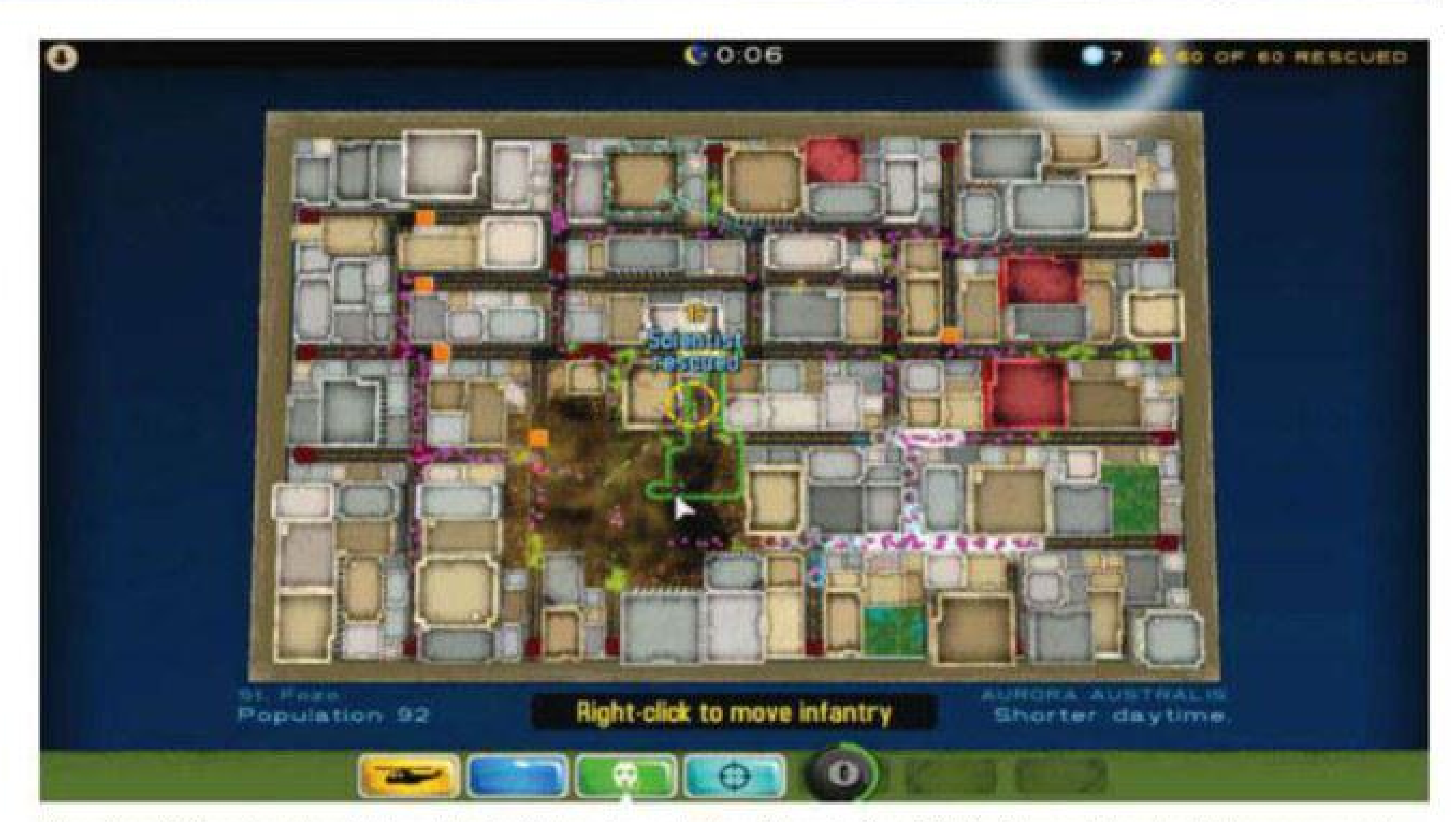


Blendo blends

While Chung's hard drive may be a graveyard for failed prototypes, Blendo Games' output has been staggeringly diverse. "I'm trying to stay away from pigeonholing myself and keep things as broad as possible," the designer explains of his varied gameography.

Gravity's Bone, a free title from 2008, is a firstperson espionage game set in a party full of block-headed, trombone-voiced characters. *Atom Zombie Smasher* is less interested in the walking dead than the urban defence strategies that stop them ("Nuke 'em from orbit!"), while *Air Forte*'s educational remit sends kids skywards to learn about maths, vocabulary and geography.

"What I love about doing this one-man thing is that you get to make something that just springs from one brain," Chung says. "Every single detail in the game reflects that one person's personality, what they're going through and their thoughts."



Atom Zombie Smasher blends the undead with top-down strategy. Begun before *Flotilla*, it was shelved and later resurrected

Cheap thrills

Where is the fast-expanding free-to-play model going, who are the new players, and what does it take to succeed in this market?

Firefall, currently in closed beta, is from one of the minds behind Blizzard's mighty *World Of Warcraft*

Free pioneers

Achaea: Dreams Of Divine Lands (1997) One of the first notable F2P games, *Achaea* was a microtransaction-supported MUD. It spent 13 years using the payment model, but in 2010 switched to a hybrid model that gave special benefits to paying subscribers.
Runescape (2001) It may look unassuming, but *Runescape* is one of the most popular western MMOGs ever made, supporting a playerbase of ten million users. It's not as technologically advanced as many modern MMOGs, but has spread virally as a Web browser title.
Entropia Universe (2003) Well known for its incredible economy that consistently produces new records for virtual item sales (the current record stands at about £213,000), *EU's* in-game currency is directly interchangeable with real money. Development studio MindArk even created an ATM card for players that allowed them to withdraw in-game currency in the real world.
Maple Story (2003) Though its 2D exterior may seem unimpressive at first glance, *Maple Story* is one of the world's most popular games. In 2009, South Korean developer Wizet announced that it had reached 92 million players. The title subsists mainly on vanity items and services like haircuts and items for avatars.

The free-to-play gaming model has proved nothing short of revolutinary, moving within the span of only a few years from being perceived as the last-ditch model for desperately failing MMOGs to become a perfectly viable business model for all genres on all platforms. Yet despite its astounding success, F2P (to use the now-common shorthand) has not proved fully effective. Even today, the most successful games adopting the model have difficulty getting more than five per cent of their playerbases to pay for anything at all – and only one to three per cent of players pay in significant amounts. But that one to three per cent is capable of supporting a playerbase of millions. It's a small subset of players known within the F2P industry as 'whales'.

"We expected to lose many of our subscribers because why would they pay when it was free?" says **Adam Mirsky**, executive director of communications at *Lord Of The Rings Online* studio Turbine, about switching the company's games to a hybrid model of F2P and subscription charges. "But what we found is some people are subscribing and spending money in the store too. Some people are spending hundreds and thousands of dollars."

"[Some players] can spend thousands of pounds a month on content – they just have to consume, they have to be number one," says **Mark Gerhard**, CEO of Jagex Games Studio, developer of pioneering F2P title *Runescape*. "But at the same time it's a very small percentage. This is single-digit at best, and that's even fractional. Then you've got people who'll almost violently never pay: 'I'm going to stick it to the man'. But you need them to balance the game, to get it to critical mass, for virality."

Many new upcoming PC games are adopting the F2P model, even if most are staying the course with pay to play [P2P]. On mobile platforms, however, the balance is closer to parity. The iOS App Store's top 200 highest grossing apps are split almost evenly between free to play and pay to play (92 out of 200 are free to play). More significantly, taking three separate tallies across August and September 2011, ten out of the top 15 highest grossing apps were free to play.

The major question that developers should be asking themselves is what happens when western gamers become more comfortable with F2P and start to spend more. If even 15 per cent of the audience was a paying one, the knock-on effects throughout the game industry could be seismic.

"We believe that the three per cent is pretty standard," says **Peter Farago**, VP of Flurry, an analytics firm which monitors the mobile applications industry. He notes, however, that some games – such as poker – can reach as high as five per cent, although "the traditional simulation games – such as farming, city-building, etc – tend to be closer to three per cent."

"We don't think this will change dramatically, since this percentage represents the proportion of massmarket consumers – who did not intend to pay for a game at the time of download – who change their minds," Farago notes. "Many consumers downloading free-to-play games are looking for entertainment without the cost. Among those, some subset will get converted by how compelling the gameplay is."

So who are these mythical three per cent, and why are they so ready to open their wallets? There are many variables that play into the statistics and psychology of selling virtual items in free games. In broad terms, men pay more than women, spending an average of 30 per cent more per transaction. And, as Farago says: "Generation X pays, Generation Y plays." In other words, gamers aged 13 to 24 make up the biggest chunk of play time (55 per cent) but only make up 21 per cent of revenue, while gamers aged 25 to 34 represent half of all revenue (49 per cent) and comprise just 29 per cent of the total playtime.

The platform plays a huge role. Gamers using iPhones, it turns out, are the best-paying customers

Gender and age aren't the only significant factors, though. The platform the game is played on also plays a huge role. Gamers using iPhones, it turns out, are the best-paying customers around. **Kenshi Arasaki**, co-founder of A Thinking Ape, runs the free-to-play PC and iPhone game *Kingdoms at War*, and tells us his company has found that iPhone players are the most common paying customers: "We definitely see higher monetisation from players on the iPhone." And yet no one is entirely sure why this is the case. "One possibility is that Apple has built a seamless payment mechanism by allowing players to pay with their iTunes accounts," Arasaki says.

While the three per cent of players that pay for free-to-play content form the bedrock of the modern model, the biggest opportunity for devs working in this space is not in figuring out how to grow the percentage of paying customers by a couple of measly points, but rather in figuring out how to monetise the other 97 per cent. Flurry is purportedly working on technology that would allow a studio to pinpoint players who are not actively paying for in-game content, and deliver ads to just those users. Paying users could be free of advertisements, or – if desired – the developer could tailor the paying user's ads to be exclusively for in-game items and special deals.

As the free-to-play market becomes ever more crowded and competitive, it will be the developers capable of delivering the most options to consumers that will be the most successful. "It's tough to serve a platform as diverse as the PC," says **Logan Decker**, editor-in-chief of PC Gamer in the US, "but the sly PC publishers and developers understand that it's necessary to be as responsive, flexible and generous as possible in order to capture the widest audience – especially if marketing dollars are hard to come by."

However, there's a big question mark hanging over the free-to-play industry right now. Even with such a massive influx of high-quality games currently in development – especially on PC – no one knows how that new influx of competitors is going to affect the overall business.

To the casual observer, there would appear to be unlimited space for free-to-play games, since publishers won't have to share limited consumer funds. However, in this quickly approaching

scenario, time itself will become the guarded currency. The market hasn't yet faced a test of that magnitude, and there are none who truly know how that scenario might alter the landscape. With so many choices, some consumers may lose interest in paying any money for a single title, choosing instead to sample eternally from a stuffed buffet of high-quality free games.

Farago: "Like all markets, there is a true demand, meaning that there is some number of consumers who want to engage in this kind of activity. At some point, supply will meet demand, or more likely surpass it. When that happens, not all free-to-play game companies will be viable."

However, the mobile market has plenty of opportunity before that becomes a problem, thanks to a base of customers that is growing at an extremely fast rate – about a million new users per day. Many F2P games are also feasting on a seemingly endless supply of new gamers. Millions of casual gamers who rarely – if ever – played games in the past are playing on their iOS or Android devices as well as on Facebook. The party continues for now, even if obviously there will come a day when growth tails off.

At this point it may seem like every company creating non-F2P gaming content should drop what it's doing and jump on board immediately. Exponential growth, enormous profit margins – what's not to love? Well, to begin with, so many games are following the F2P model that it can be difficult to gain exposure. The reality is that traditional videogame magazines and Web sites tend to favour traditional videogames before looking at games their readers can try out for free.

Also, if a game is already established, F2P can be a hard sell to an established playerbase that already likes what it has. When companies try to change a game experience, their players often respond with venom.

Eve Online presents a good example. Though it wasn't built on the F2P model, *Eve* introduced a programme to introduce microtransactions into its sprawling universe. However, the game's notoriously hardcore fanbase was extremely unhappy about some of





Both *Eve Online* (left) and *Lord Of The Rings Online* have experimented with payment models – with varying degrees of success

the prices of those microtransactions – the most infamous of which was a $68 avatar item, a monocle. *Eve*'s players got so upset by the move that they literally went into open revolt against *Eve*'s developer, CCP Games, attacking an in-game memorial statue and locking down trade hubs, crippling the game's economy. Reports from *Eve* players say that demonstrators numbering in the thousands took part in the virtual riots.

Kristoffer Touborg, lead designer on *Eve Online*, expressed some regrets about how the situation was handled: "We were doing it for the first time. We made some rookie mistakes, and we communicated poorly with the players."

However, despite the widespread upheaval, CCP was able to recover thanks largely to a strong relationship with its customers. *Eve* has a democratic player-run government, the Council of Stellar Management, which CCP called to order to discuss the riots. The company flew the council into its Iceland HQ and succeeded in arranging a sort of ceasefire.

"F2P will be the default position for the entire game industry, apart from the highest-end franchises"

LOTRO features a similar monetisation model, yet experienced none of the vitriol that came with *Eve*'s introduction of microtransactions. **Aaron Campbell**, senior producer on the game at Turbine, says that the key was to leave the playerbase as undisturbed as possible: "Do no harm. We didn't adjust the game balance; we just gave them some new toys to play with. Things they thought were fun or interesting like cosmetic items, and even all these new players. There was an initial element of concern from the veterans wondering what will happen when all of the new players come in, thinking, 'What will happen to our community?' But a lot of our veteran players were welcoming."

The free-to-play revolution is still taking its first steps, but it has already made a clear, far-reaching impact and managed to upset the dominant paradigm in a very short period of time. The most important question of all is whether or not the rise will continue over the next few years. Most of the developers and analysts canvassed for this article are convinced that it will.

"I don't see what's happening as the 'rise' of a particular business model," says Decker about the F2P industry on PCs. "It's a fundamental transformation of the entire platform. Eventually it'll become the default position for the entire videogame industry, with the exception of the highest-end franchises."

"[We] may be outliers but we believe most of the future of the game industry will be free to play," says **Trip Hawkins**, founder of EA, The 3DO Company, and most recently the founder of F2P game developer and publisher Digital Chocolate. "Everything is going digital and becoming more convenient. The browser will be the big new game platform because it is convenient, social and viral. Any free game that you can play simply by clicking on a link is going to spread virally."

However, Jagex's Gerhard cautions against blindly going into F2P publishing just because it's the fashionable thing to do. "It's less about what's the right model, less about how to take money from a customer's wallet, and more about what kind of gameplay you have that's conducive to that type of monetisation mechanism," he says. "I think a lot of people say: 'All the successful games are doing this now, so you must, too'. We've looked at that and said it's the substitute of thinking. If you copy it wrong you might be copying the things that work, but you're probably also copying the things that don't."

No one knows exactly where F2P is headed, but its arrival has already transformed two entire gaming markets, and there's no sign of the disruption ending any time soon. ■



Aaron Campbell
Senior producer, Turbine



Kristoffer Touborg
Lead designer, CCP Games



Mark Gerhard
CEO, Jagex Games Studio

Firefall
Publisher Webzen
Developer Red 5 Studios
Release December 2011
With Mark Kern (one of the leads on *World Of Warcraft* at Blizzard) at the helm, *Firefall* was always destined to be one of the biggest games on the F2P radar, but it wasn't until Red 5 unveiled the game's open-world MMOG-style questing that online gamers really started to take notice. Like a mash-up of *WOW* and *Borderlands* with a heavy competitive shooter edge, it's nothing if not bold. *Firefall* is practically two full games, all for the low, low price of free. It'd be easy to boil this down to '*Warcraft* with a shotgun', but it's unlikely that many would have a problem with that.

Tribes: Ascend
Publisher Hi-Rez Studios
Developer In-house
Release Q1 2012
The classic competitive shooter *Tribes* is being reborn as an F2P effort, complete with all the accoutrements fans have become accustomed to, such as jetpacks and 'skiing'. Hi-Rez will be charting a more conventional path through the F2P space by utilising an in-game item store. Occupying the same sort of space as *Firefall*, it'll be interesting to see whether there's room for both in the still growing, but ever more crowded, F2P shooter market.

World Of Warplanes
Publisher Wargaming.net
Developer In-house
Release 2012
Having conquered rolling swathes of F2P territory with *World Of Tanks*, Wargaming.net's Belarus-based development studio is moving on to new fronts, with this and naval warfare sim *World Of Battleships* already in development. Promising the same blend of easy-to-control yet historically accurate vehicles as the previous game, *World Of Warplanes* will also allow players to purchase vehicles with gold they've earned (or, of course, purchased) in *World Of Tanks*.



Free realms

Five F2P games to watch, chosen from a deluge of examples making their way to a PC near you soon

End Of Nations
Publisher Trion Worlds
Developer Petroglyph Games
Release 2011
Fresh from the release of *Rift*, Trion Worlds is manoeuvring for another foothold in the MMOG genre. Rather than trying the same thing twice, however, it's taking a different tack here by releasing not another subs-based MMORPG but an F2P MMORTS. *End Of Nations* is developed by Petroglyph Games, the veteran RTS studio behind *Star Wars: Empire At War* in 2006 and *Universe At War* in 2007.

Super Monday Night Combat
Publisher Uber Entertainment
Developer In-house
Release TBA
The original *Monday Night Combat* was a welcome success for Uber Entertainment, debuting on Xbox Live Arcade in 2010 as part of Microsoft's Summer Of Arcade titles, and eventually going on to make quite a splash on PC, too. While the gameplay in the sequel will benefit from only small tweaks (like the switch from six-on-six to five-on-five matches), the business model couldn't be more different. Uber's spin on the F2P model will include innovative ideas such as constantly rotating free and paid items. Each week, different in-game items will be available for free, allowing players to sample new items all of the time.

What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

Your play brain and you

You love them, you play them, but after a while you just sort of… drift away. You look at their boxes guiltily and promise yourself you'll finish them soon. Then you buy another and it becomes your new favourite. I'm talking about your games, of course, and the likelihood that you never finish most of them.

For your DVDs, books and albums, it's different. When you get around to watching, reading or listening to them, you'll probably finish them. So why not your games?

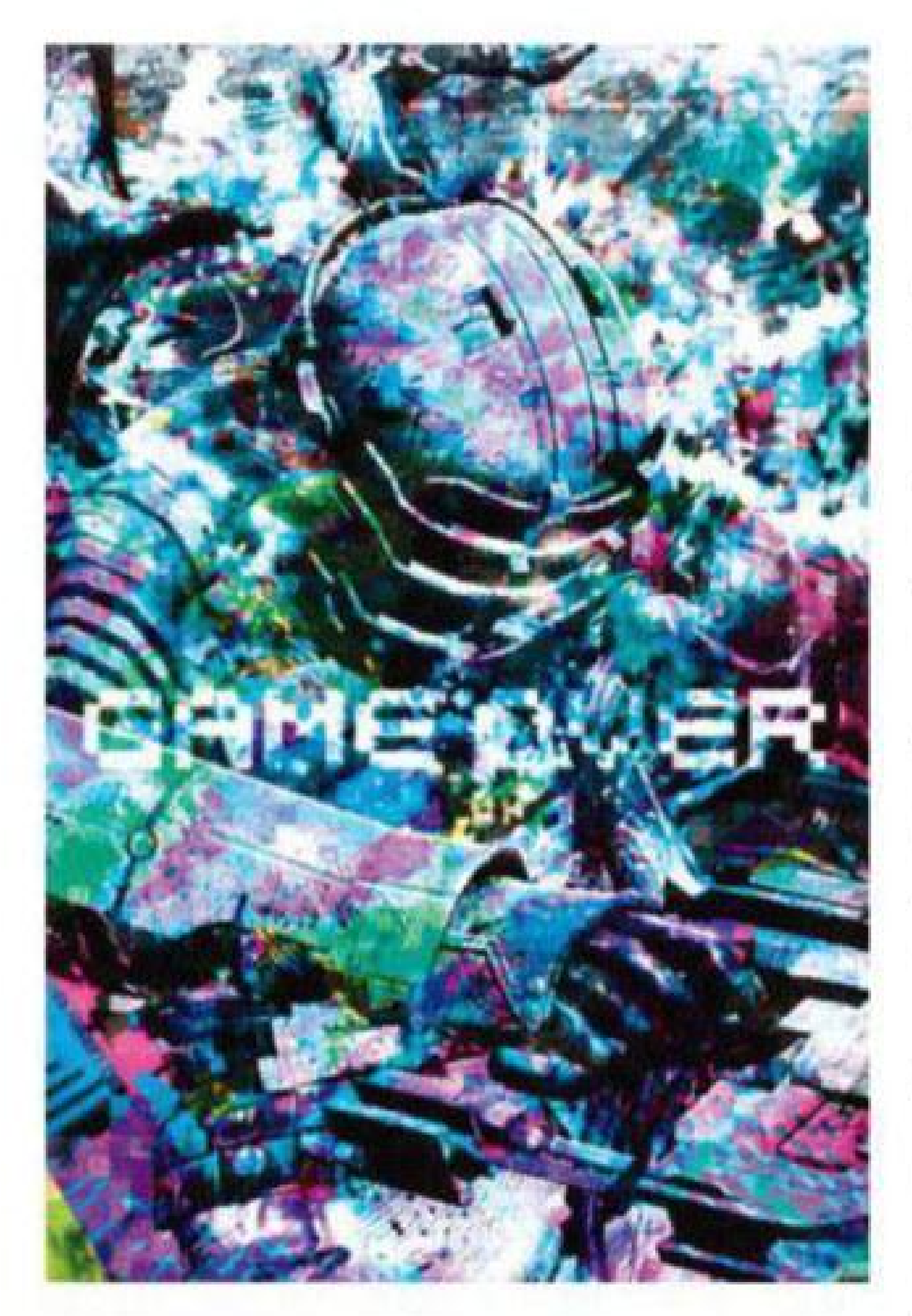
Well, the answer is obvious: you get bored, even if you don't want to admit it. Some part of you ceases to want to get through those last few levels. It feels as though the experience is already done, and you don't really care how it ends.

I call that part of you the 'play brain'.

When you first see an E3 trailer for the latest spectacular it sparks your imagination and makes you wonder just how awesome that game could be. You sense the joy and emotion of the gameworld and imagine yourself being there and doing awesome things. When you play the game, that sensation keeps going. It's like the game is talking to you, leading you through somewhere and letting you do something special.

That side of you is your 'art brain', the part of you that seeks thaumatic experience and where the passion of fandom comes from. However, your play brain sees through the disguise to the machine underneath. It's fascinated by the system of the game rather than its skin, and it reduces all that it sees to problems and solutions. The play brain is literal rather than metaphorical. It sees any game as a series of controls, objects and levers. Everything is a thing to either be interacted with, destroyed, built or taken. Every scenario is a goal, every impediment a challenge to be overcome.

When the pressure is on and the game is in full flow, the play brain dominates your attention. It filters out unnecessary information, and focuses purely on the task at hand. Like a soldier on the battlefield, the play brain is able to boil any situation down into survival, mission and required actions, and then take those actions. It gets you in the zone, where fear and meaning vanish. It also perceives according to type rather than instance. The play brain prefers to know that all green orcs behave the same, or that all barrels explode in the same way, because that knowledge helps it to form strategy. Unlike drama, where a gun on a table can have significance and symbolic value, in a game the play brain regards a gun on a table as either useful or useless. Nothing else.



Reality is often complicated, unfair and confusing, but games let us go to a world where the rules are fair

All games are entertainment for the play brain first and foremost. Reality is often complicated, unfair and confusing, but games let us go to a world where the rules are fair. They take us to a place where our actions can have significant consequences and where we are empowered. Games take us to places where we can win, unambiguously, and feel good about that. The play brain wants that high.

It wants to keep achieving new goals and mastering its fascination anew. If it scores a high score then it wants to beat that. If it gains a level in a sim game then it wants the next one. The play brain loves to achieve, understand and overcome. And this is why you don't finish those games: at some point, you just stop winning.

This is the point at which the game has either become so easy that it is no longer a challenge, or so difficult that there is no progress. The play brain reaches the maximum mastery that it will ever achieve, and at that point the game stops being fun. Instead it becomes work.

So you may have reached a point in an RPG where you've hit on a perfect combination of powers. The game becomes easy, and suddenly the levels seem like a slog. There's no joy in winning against the opponent that you already know you can beat, so the play brain is not interested. Alternatively, you reach a point in a game where a certain challenge is just too hard. You can't figure it out, don't have the skill or the patience to overcome, and you become frustrated.

Some players are more tolerant of these moments than others. Some find winning so addictive that they will grind their way through the whole of the rest of a game just to get that one last win. Some consider cheats, FAQs and guides to be perfectly valid tools to overcome the too-hard parts and get back to the fun. Others will just give up at the first sign of boredom or frustration.

The fascination of the play brain is a universal constant across all genres. *FarmVille* players are just as fascinated as *Gears Of War* players. *Minecraft* players and *Angry Birds* players are similarly deeply locked into a system that they find almost endlessly interesting.

It's about whether the actions in the game are interesting, and whether they lead to strategic thought. Do the actions extend in some way? Does it lead to useful emergent effects? Is there a repeatable dynamic that you can build on? Games are only fun for as long as the play brain finds the system fascinating to play with.

Your games are unfinished because you got what you needed out of them. Time to play something new.

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him online at whatgamesare.com

CREATE
INSIGHT

In The Click Of It



CLINT HOCKING

Deep thoughts: could you improve on chess or poker?

In the quest to better understand how games generate meaning, something I feel we need a more robust understanding of is the notion of depth. Depth is something we often talk about when discussing a game, but it is an elusive quality to define. Strangely, human beings seem to have an almost innate ability to quickly discern whether or not a game is deep when playing it. Yet beyond simple assertions about the presence or absence of depth, without a more rigorous understanding of what depth is, we gain almost no utility from this knowledge.

So what is depth? How do you measure it? Where is it found? And most importantly, how does this help us make better games? The working definition that I have been using lately is that depth is a measure of how much room there is in a game for a player to improve at it.

I like this definition for two reasons. The first reason is because it is dependent on player experience. Depth is still an innate property of the game, but it cannot be measured in the game – it can only be measured indirectly by measuring players. This means you cannot see in the code how deep a game is, you can only compare beginners to experts and determine from the range, rate and persistence of improvement of player performance whether or not the game is deep, how deep it is, and where that depth lies.

The other thing I like about this definition is that an important consequence falls out of it, which is that we can observe that different players can be better at a given game in different ways, and yet equal overall. Some golfers, for example, are good at the long game, while others are good at the short game. Improving your putt makes you better at golf in a different way than does improving your drive. The best golfers, of course, are good at both the long and the short game – but there is more depth still, as some expert golfers might improve their discipline, while others might improve their endurance. This demonstrates that games can have depth along multiple axes – that depth is not a singular well within which swim all of a game's mechanics and dynamics, but is rather a collection of discrete buckets.

Recognising where the depth of a given game lies is fundamental to balancing the game, and also to forging the dynamics through which the game generates meaning. A good illustration of this is seen in a comparison between two classic games: chess and poker.



Understanding the real and enduring depth of poker or chess would help us should we wish to improve upon them

Both chess and poker have considerable depth in their respective computational domains, and both have considerable depth in their psychological domains as well. Computationally speaking, chess has lots of room for players to get better by improving their ability to crunch through a huge tree of possible future board positions, to cull that tree effectively, and visualise as far down the optimal branches as possible. Poker has a similarly huge tree of possible future states as new cards are dealt or revealed, but because of the random factor, poker's computational depth is best understood statistically. At the highest levels, the difference between two expert poker players along the computational axis of skill is arguably irrelevant. I would argue that in terms of these computational sorts of depth, chess is the deeper of the two games.

Conversely, from a psychological perspective, chess requires players to understand their opponents' ways of thinking, their moods, their stylistic preferences and personal strategies, and also to understand their opponents' understanding of these things. This psychological understanding helps you cull the tree of future possible board states more effectively, anticipating an opponent's moves and his expectations of yours. Unlike chess, however, poker has a great deal of hidden information. Bluffing, reading tells, recognising tension and excitement – and the other social skills of poker – are not mere side effects of the game's hidden information: they *are* poker. Where poker falls short of chess in terms of its pure computational depth, I believe that it far exceeds the depth of chess in the psychological space.

To return to my original definition of depth, chess and poker are both impressively deep games with lots of room for players to improve along at least two axes. Both are deep computationally, and both are deep psychologically. But, as I said, what is important is not just finding where the depth of a game resides and quantifying it, but using that information to make better games. Understanding where the real and enduring depth of poker or chess resides would help us focus our efforts should we endeavour to polish or improve upon them.

Of course, most of us have never even come close to designing a game as great as chess or poker, and until we do, we won't need to tune either of them. But being able to identify where the depth lies in our own games by observing how much room there is for player improvement along the axes we define will help us make the right decisions about where to invest in polish to make sure we are putting a shine on the most meaningful parts of our games – the parts that compel players to continually engage with them.

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com



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The Possibility Space



RANDY SMITH

Expanding on the character of story

I am writing dialogue, which makes me feel shame. Are cutscenes any way to tell a story in the interactive medium? Though previously convinced they should be banned, I've considered movies with voiceovers, text establishing "Berlin, 1945", and so on. It can be a crutch, but it's not necessarily morally wrong. Still I wince when our new project, *Waking Mars*, opens with text instead of gameplay. WTF.

What is even the point of story in this medium? It sounds rhetorical, but taking the question seriously can help decide whether your game needs one and if so what character it should have. Fundamentally games traffic in experiences, and from Mario to *Quake* they can provide essentially nothing but. This could work for Tiger Style's games, but to me, story binds these experiences together and gives them more dimension, depicting not just each individually but how experiences relate to each other. Not just what it's like to cultivate alien lifeforms, but how you got into this situation, and how you'll survive.

Yet you don't need cinematics to do this. *Spider* told its story without a single word, using the 'pull' technique. The player pulls story out, opting in by paying more attention to the backgrounds of each level. I like this technique because it's unobtrusive, happening at the player's chosen pace without interrupting gameplay, and although the story isn't dynamic, it's still different for each player depending on which clues are noticed and how they're interpreted. *Mars* uses the more conventional 'push' technique in which the game disrupts your experience to thrust story at you. It's sort of horrible, so what's the advantage?

I tend toward stories with interwoven timelines and complicated character perspectives. This lady married this guy but left him for another when the wealth they enjoyed disappeared mysteriously upon the death of the family patriarch. It'd be trivial to explain in prose, but with only images it's way harder. You might establish failed marriage or hard financial times, but the causal connections are conveyed unreliably. *Mars* was originally a pull story in which you explore an underground world, see strange and exotic things, and if you've paid attention respond to them. I switched to push because *Mars* is about electromagnetic



People are curious about the astronaut, how he came to be lost in Martian caves, and why he keeps growing these plants

fields, not wedding rings, semipermeable membranes instead of treasure maps, unfamiliar things whose significance isn't immediate. If the story doesn't help explain, comprehension will extend mainly to scientists and Wikipedia nerds. And also less than one per cent of *Spider* players found its ending. Story shouldn't be imaginative but incomprehensible. Who wants to pull a JJ Abrams by setting up compelling mysteries that evidently have no a priori resolution? The advantage of push is married to its weakness – you can interrupt the player to explain something. Our ambition is to strike a balance, providing enough information for you to follow along while leaving plenty for your interpretation.

Push also supports a more complete story, and whereas no one ever asked "who is this spider?" they are curious about the astronaut, how he came to be lost in Martian caves, and why he should keep growing these plants. Providing these answers is close to my stated purpose for including story at all. A speculative fiction about what happened on Mars three billion years ago might be fascinating, but it feels remote until you add the human experience. What would it be like, as a real person, to make such a discovery?

So, who is this astronaut? A faceless, unspeaking silhouette or a fully realised character? I wanted to lean toward faceless, striving always to give the player more ownership, but this often makes you the estranged, personality-handicapped guy the real characters talk to expecting no response. Lean too far the other way and you get Cole Phelps, who does whatever he wants since, between the two of you, he's the only one who really understands the story. Liang Qi is our character, and we decide what he thinks, feels and says. But he's a man of competing perspectives, pulling him in different directions. You choose his actions, and we promise you can't do anything incompatible with his personality.

Opting for real characters meant we had to design Liang and his fellow astronaut Amani. We focused on traits that would surface during the story. Whether Amani misses Earth or Liang has an ex-wife is irrelevant if it never comes up. The recurring topic is interpretation of their discoveries, so what's their personality in that regard? To create contrast, one of them is quick with scientific analysis of the facts, whereas the other waxes philosophical about what it all means. Scientists are supposed to be sceptical and objective, but I hate clichés and experiment with turning them on their heads. So one of our astronauts jumps to common-sense conclusions while the other is emotionally reactive, which causes them to participate in fresh and novel ways. With the right mixture of traits the characters come alive and feel worthy. Their dynamics are compelling, their plights are sympathetic, and they have a way of writing their own backstories. All that's left is to write their frickin' dialogue.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose second game, Waking Mars, will be released at the end of 2011

Word Play



JAMES LEACH

Getting to the bottom of videogame characters

Writing videogames is character-forming. Well, part of it is. And it's a crucial part. After all, who's going to do the wisecracking? And who can we put on the box? Yep, characters are here to stay. In the same way our brains are geared to pareidolia, 'recognising' rudimentary faces in clouds and on toast and the front of Adrian Chiles' head, we latch on to characters in games. They're something we can associate with in an otherwise weird gameworld. Stories, even ones in videogames, are all about people.

There are hundreds, thousands of characters in games. Many are called by the code, but few are chosen by the public. Few are exalted and transcend their game, to be turned into icons (sometimes in more than one sense).

Why is this? The quality of the graphics? The facial expressions? The astonishing dialogue? It can't be – look at Mario. Why does Mario work? Because he's a nothing. He hasn't got a character. He's recognisable is the way that a logo is. Mario works simply because everyone knows who he is, and the sort of games he appears in. I mean, Mario's a plumber. If he was real, you'd wait half a day for him, he'd turn up last thing, remove all the cleaning products from under your sink and depart, leaving an unidentified bit of stained white plastic and BO. No, you don't think of Mario as a plumber, or as anything. He just is. And the moustache, the red and blue, the stupid hat – you'd know him anywhere.

Instant recognition is a key factor. Guns, bare legs, a long plait and a well-filled tank top. Hello, Lara. The year is 1996 and, yay, girls get a strong, sexy, smart protagonist for the first time. Or rather, boys get a skimpily clad lass with hydraulic Bristols to play with for the first time.

Lara Croft works because of how she looks, not what she's like. She is a girl. What little of her character we truly know about is cool, and thus she appeals to both girls and boys. She's famous because she was first and she looked sassy and when you dressed Rhona Mitra or Angelina Jolie up as her, it made a game extremely hip. Oh, and don't forget the tank top. It doesn't hurt that Lara's chest resembles a dead heat in a large-tit race.

So game characters are all about defined,



Gordon Freeman doesn't have a body like an overinflated brown lilo. He hasn't spent five years in a jungle war. He's us

recognisable looks (and peanut smuggling). Let's fast-forward two years and meet Gordon Freeman. Arguably as seminal a character as Lara Croft (yes, yes, seminal), initially he seemed as attractive as a Proclaimer. And he was a physics geek. "Still," thought a sticky-palmed young populace, still fresh from 'controlling' Lara Croft, "bet he's got some killer one-liners." No. *Half-Life*'s hero never says a word. And that, perhaps, is his saving grace. He's not a Stallone-type gremlin with a body like an overinflated brown lilo. He hasn't spent five years in a jungle war. He's us. But calmer, a fair bit smarter and braver, and with glasses that make him look like Bricktop from Snatch. And we love him. Also, he has a crowbar.

But one series of game Tippexed over the old rules, rewrote them in marker pen then tore them up, removed the staples and threw the pages out of the window to flap about on the windy, mean streets like albino litter-chickens. *GTA*.

Niko Bellic out of *Grand Theft Auto IV* is possibly the first game character not to be an extreme of anything. Yes, he's tough; yes, he's laconic; yes, he's flawed; yes, he's Serbian; but he transcends this collection of defining characteristics. He's a weary, damaged bloke clinging on to hope in a rubbish world with a titty-obsessed close relative. Basically, he's Paul Ross.

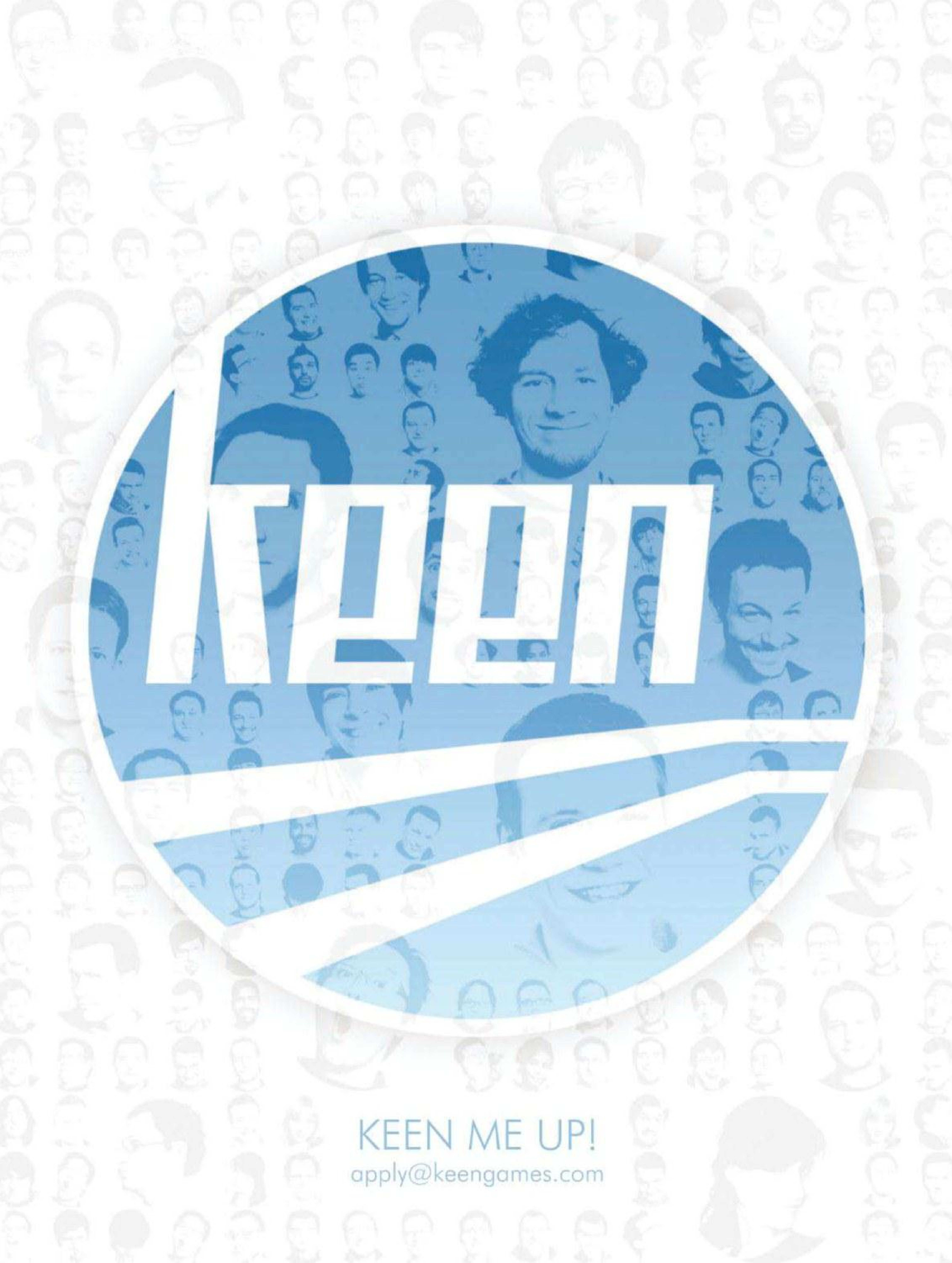
Niko works, though, because his setting is original and adult. He's in a grown-up game, which means it can be shocking and amoral and funny and – here's the genius of *GTA* – natural and even understated. It isn't scampering about like a child allowed to stay up late in that grown-up world. And Niko Bellic rules because he's given space. So often characters are allotted limited space, time, text etc to be developed. Subtlety is the first casualty. You end up with: "Hey. I'm Dr Sectionable. Look what I have no qualms about doing to this punnet of kittens!" Quick and to the point, but we're in cartoon land. Niko and his associates had enough room to breathe, like a fine wine or a wealthy asthmatic.

GTAIV also provided a world for our urban Serbs to kick against. Characters, as I'm sure I've spouted before, need to change during a story. This is why potential mould-fitting muscle-dudes like Marcus Fenix don't quite get into the third dimension. You've got to be on a journey which overturns your beliefs. You've got to feel regret, disillusion, anger, pride. Failing that, you've got to get yourself a cousin who's obsessed with tits.

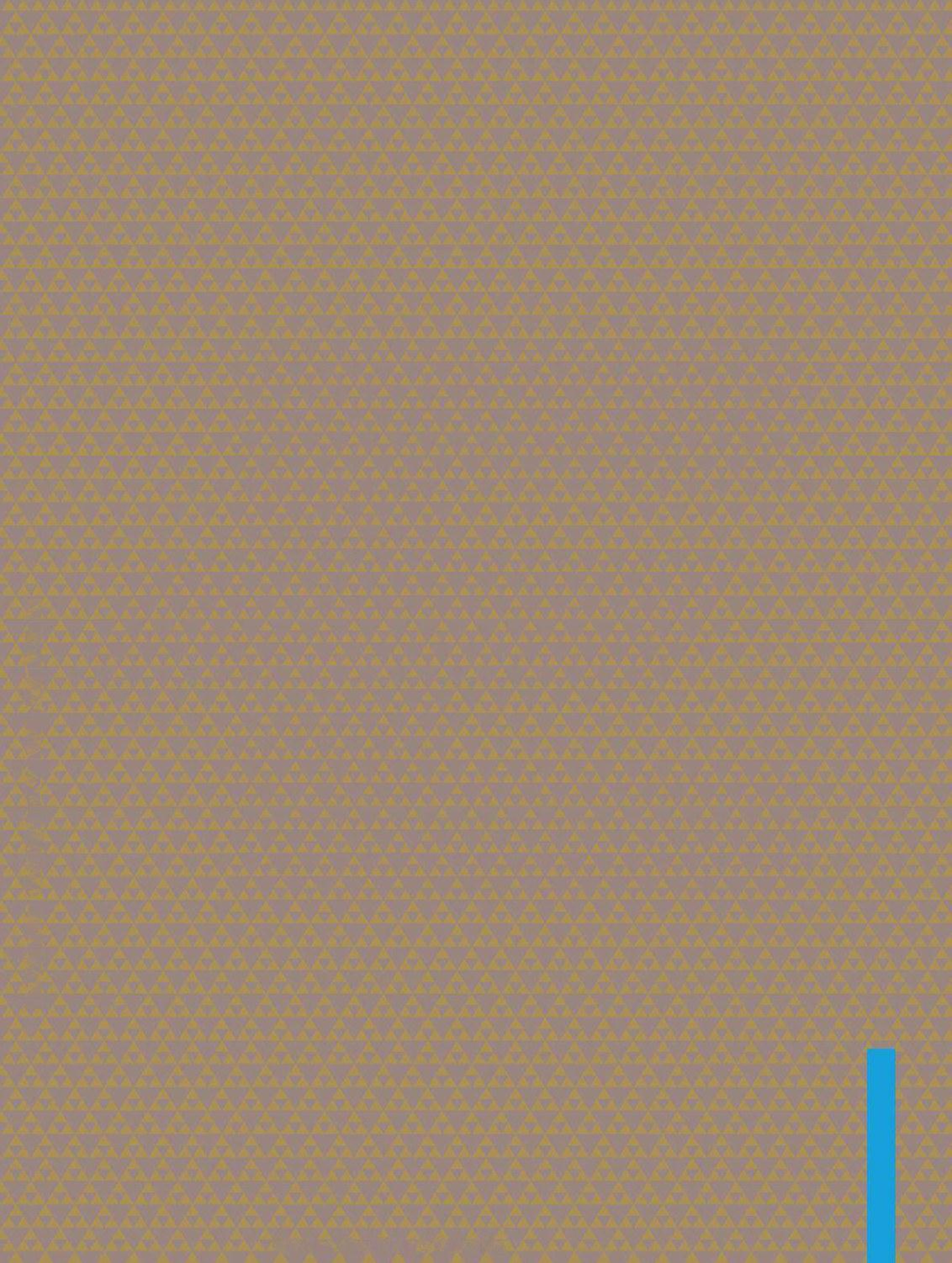
Or you can simply have characters who aren't sweaty, druggy or gritty and simply say great, funny, stylish dialogue. GLaDOS from *Portal* is the perfect example. You can't put a poster of her on your wall, but she's quite a female. If indeed she is a female. Considering we started with Lara Croft, she's a good place to end up. All that remains to say about characters is that all sidekicks in games are rubbish.

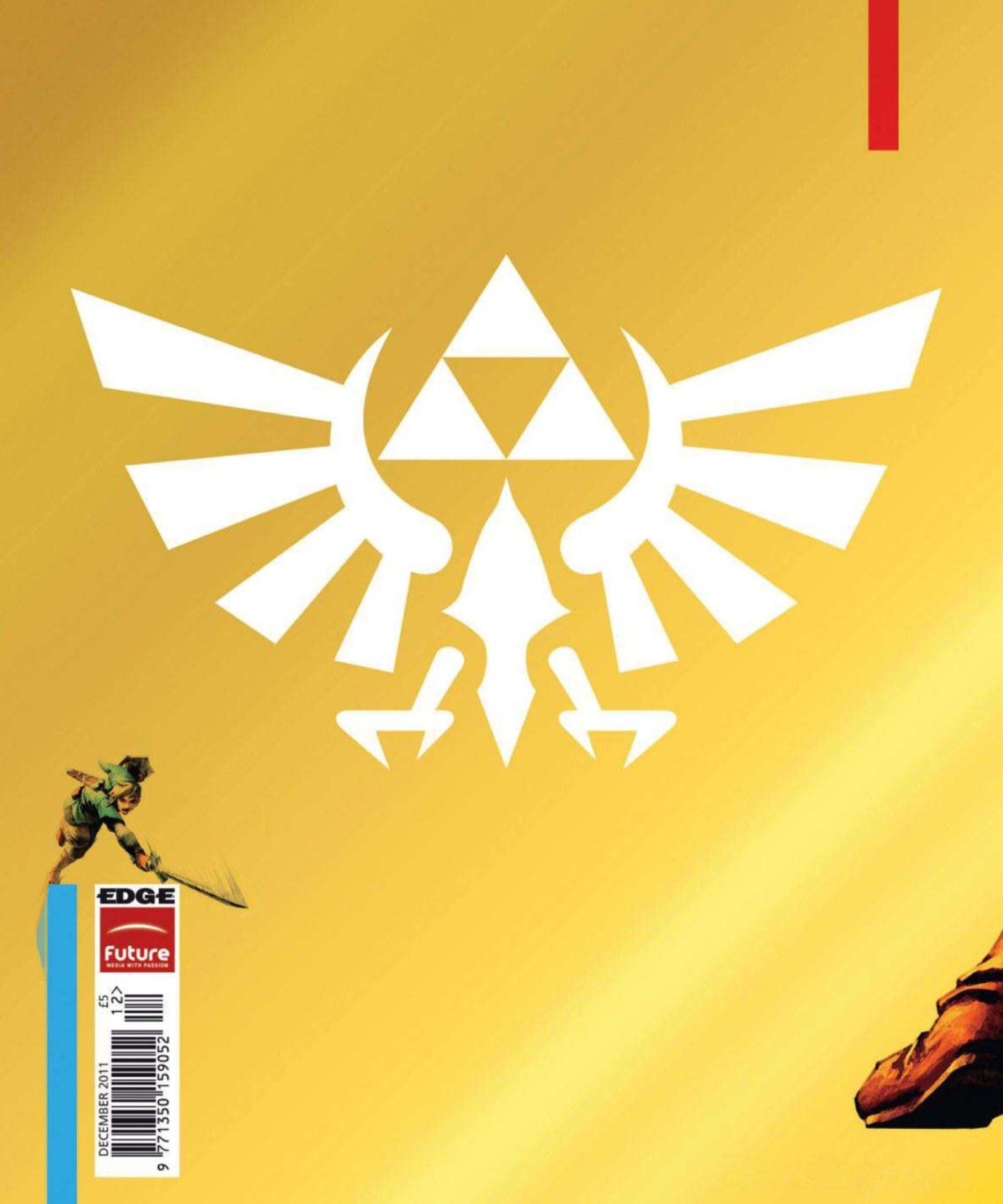
Go on – name one that isn't.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online


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